The Way of the Heron

Table of Contents

Part I	**3**
Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	23
* The Legend of Daniel *	33
Chapter 5	39
* The Legend of James *	45
Chapter 6	50
Chapter 7	57
* The Legend of Opal *	64
Chapter 8	68
Chapter 9	74
Part II	**79**
Chapter 10	81
Chapter 11	89
* The Legend of Anthony *	94
Chapter 12	99
* The Legend of Brian *	102
Chapter 13	110
Chapter 14	113

Chapter 15 116
* The Legend of Cardal * 122

Part I

Chapter 1

"Don't push yourself too hard, Cardal—there's no use letting the trees win."

I sit on a fresh stump. My mother is right—it's only June. There's a good two months before the storms set in and the rest of the wood is rendered useless. I think that our tree farm speaks to her. For the last three months, I've come here with her every day, and every morning as we're leaving home, she'll make a comment on it. Many of these musings are predictions: "I'll bet the gophers start coming to visit soon," "this rain might be the end of that little tree to the east," "I think those violets are going to pull through." They always come true. Sure, she's old enough to have learned the ins and outs of the seasons and how they play with every corner of the farm. But I still think some of it must be magic.

After a bit of rest, I move to some smaller trees a few feet over—they're much easier to handle and I'm able to gather more fruit in much less time. She sits on a blanket spread out on a patch of grass, writing in her red leather-bound notebook. "I've

been watching these trees for a long time, as my father did before me," she says. "They taught me some about them, so that I could learn even more on my own. I want you to learn more by miles, which starts with me."

I have spent more time on the farm these past three months than ever before. Of course, I would often help out over the course of an afternoon. By eighteen, children either begin apprenticeships or start working in their trade full-time, and with only a few years left without responsibility, I had been making progress to prepare myself for the rest of my life, but I had a very calm, full life.

Every morning, I would drink a glass of milk, pack my books, and walk to school, first along the orchard, then across the creek, then through the town square. At the other end of the creek lives Brian, who I've known all my life. We look nothing alike, but some believe us to be siblings, by nature of us knowing almost all there is to know about each other. When we were younger, we would sometimes dawdle through the nooks and crannies of the town square after class had begun, believing ourselves nimble enough to evade the suspicion of the stall workers, though surely they were merely choosing to grant us this slightly-undisciplined expression of friendship.

This is not to say that I wasn't interested in school. I loved all subjects, but especially writing. There was much to learn from reading old, great authors, but I often preferred when we wrote as a way of speaking with each other, stumbling and undertrained though we may have been.

The others my age and I spent hours playing games and talking under big elm trees. We would often find ourselves at someone's home, early enough to have plenty of daylight left but late enough to start to scavenge for food, often to the chagrin of whatever parent we had stumbled upon, who might pour the makings of their half-cooked dinner into their biggest pot and begin to add to it quite a bit more of everything.

More recently Brian and I, as well as many of our friends, have spoken more of our futures - mine as a tree farmer, his as an architect, our respective families' businesses. Both are successful enough to let us live well, but childhood restlessness is seldom satisfied. He talks about his idea for some material that can be molded into giant stones and used to make buildings more quickly than with ordinary brick and mortar. I think about how to find new methods of breeding which can grow trees to heights never seen.

Then one morning in March, as I ate breakfast, my mother came downstairs looking a bit preoccupied. She exchanged the usual pleasantries, a "good morning," a comment on the weather. She looked out the window, as she always does, as if she was going to express hope regarding the number of bees that might pass through the farm this year. "Cardal, I don't think I'm going to be around much longer. I'm going to have you start coming to the farm with me every day, alright? I'll go down today to let the school know."

That day, she was the pinnacle of health, as far as anyone could tell. Everyone in our family

had lived to eighty, some even longer. All of them had worked on the farm themselves. It seemed to give them life and—until this year—it had given her life as well. But few questioned her conclusion when they heard. Nobody had heard of someone in such good health predicting their own death (and certainly not then announcing it so calmly and matter-of-factly), but she was always so composed and so grounded in reality that her revelation was accepted by the community as a fact like any other. She didn't come across as some kind of fortune teller or mystic. Her relevations sounded like someone describing something they had just seen out the window and were simply relaying back to you, and disarmed you to feel the same, as if they were simply something she could see thanks to the angle of the light from where she stood.

Word spreads quickly. I hear many variants of condolences (many with at least a tinge of confusion regarding tense). Many ask how I'm feeling regarding taking on the family business. I tell them I'm confident—though I may not get as many years as those before me to learn under the auspices of my family, my mother is a good teacher.

And while I believe this to be true, I'm careful not to say much about the feeling that so much responsibility is being handed down to me just a bit too soon. For the last hundred years, our nation has been battling the *bitter cold* (a name a bit too tongue-in-cheek for my taste), a seasonal illness which is often fatal for its victims, and leaves behind each year a wake of grief. Sometimes we are lucky, and the death toll is small, but there

have been years when even our small town of Farmer's Berry has lost dozens, and the whole nation of Circe has lost thousands or tens of thousands. However, many years ago, as the story goes, an old man who was terminally ill from the disease found himself cured after going into the forest at the edge of town, where he had wished to spend his final days. It has since been discovered that the norocos trees are very soft, allowing a moss to grow into them which, under the right conditions, can alleviate many symptoms of the bitter cold by harvesting it and placing it in the home. Since this revelation, our family has been in the business of harvesting this moss to be used in this and nearby towns. Though the bitter cold still strikes the same fear into the hearts of the people, the moss has been used to save many lives across Circe; those old enough to remember a time before it treat it as something of a miracle. But the moss is very fickle. The branches have to be cut at the right time of month, the right time of day, and it has to be harvested quickly and delicately. It isn't a task that anyone can do. I don't want that many lives in my hands just yet.

Within a month it becomes clear that she was right. The summer is particularly dry, and comes early. With it, she begins to grow weaker as the weeks and months pass, as if she was being shriveled up by the sun. But she continues to come out to the farm with me every day, and still talks frequently with her friends in town, for a good many months. It seems that these tasks almost supernaturally improve her health, seeding some clouds in

the increasingly bleak landscape of her condition. But these moments are nothing more than that—moments. As she begins to wither, so it seems do the trees. Though this time of year they are usually full of moisture, full of life, this summer refuses to let them carry on as fully as they are accustomed to.

My mother's nonchalance is a bit baffling to me, as she prepares me for life without her. She shows me how to tell if a branch is ready to be harvested based on the way the light hits it, how to cut it so that it falls gracefully and none of the moss is destroyed, how to use some of the tools that have been developed over the years to make the work manageable at a larger scale. She rehashes stories about family members I never had the chance to meet while she idly cooks or cleans. She makes sure I take time to visit with friends. "I know you want to get the most out of what time we have left," she says one day when I asked why she was so insistent on me seeing others even in these last few months, "but all memories are better shared."

Though she is only in her late forties, her father died many years ago, making her and I the last surviving members of the family in town. I've never known my father: he left town when I was two. Many in town speak ill of him when they think I'm not around, saying that he was trying to ruin this town's way of life, but my mother never said anything of the sort. She never speaks about his departure, always only wishing him well, though I don't know where he is or even if he's still alive. I

often wonder what he did to earn himself this awful reputation in town.

I suppose she is less worried because she believes I can become strong.

July comes, and then August. Monsoon season is on the horizon, maybe a week or two away. My mother largely holds out until the new month. When it comes, it leaves her bedridden. "I'm glad we got to share the middle of the harvest, if not the end. You became one with the trees, and I got to see it." I wanted to share the end of the harvest, after the monsoons hit and we got to share our medicine with the town, for her to get to show them what she had taught me.

The night before the first monsoon, she brought up the topic of her notebooks. "The red book contains everything I've already told you. Read it. Re-read it. I wish I could help you slowly absorb it all, but you're going to have to do that part of my job for me. The blue book contains everything else. I want you to learn as much as you can for yourself. Don't open that book until you need to." I gave her my word. That night, she dies peacefully. A service is scheduled for two weeks later. The first day of the monsoons, I am in the shop alone, partitioning our fully harvested collection of moss into small containers to distribute to the townspeople.

Chapter 2

I decide to stay in my old home, rather than moving in with a friend. I've done much of the work of maintaining the house for years, leaving my mom to the family business, so I'm comfortable watching after myself. Not much has to be done this time of year. My mother would usually spend much of her time socializing this time of year: keeping people company, enjoying walks around town and the conversations that came with them. I return to school.

I find myself drawn more to science than to literature lately. Nobody wants to be reminded of the past; it's better to focus on constructing the future. I spend a lot of time reading about chemistry, and I look into botany more on my own time. I work on memorizing my mother's red notebook, of course. There are many questions the books can't answer, and I begin, poorly, laboriously, trying to answer some of them myself. Her words still echo in my head: *I want you to learn more by miles.*

The snowbanks preserve my youth like fresh fish: when they melt, it will be time to get back

to the farm to tend the soil and plant. When I walk outside, I imagine my body heat passing along to them, slowly reducing them to big puddles. I visit my friends, share meals with them, and take part in adventures with them when I can, but my conscience often wanders off, leaving them with a heap of nods and half-hearted smiles masquerading as a boy. These departures take their toll: as my soul is slowly and inexorably pushed further from theirs, the resulting gap not only grows but pollutes with their resentment, as if I was withdrawing from them out of selfishness.

Brian takes me on walks in the evenings. Though my dirty conscience often protests, it's still clear that this friendship is one we need—I wish I felt guiltier about abandoning it, scared and helpless and starving like a small child, for Brian to save. Often, we say nothing at all, content to share the vivacity of the cold air in our lungs and the dancing of the starlight on the snowbanks and through the trees. When we do speak, it's usually of the distant future; perhaps we aren't ready to contemplate the present.

One day in early February, I urge Brian to walk a bit further, beyond our usual path close to the perimeter of the city and into the fields, where we haven't been since we were both children, ravenously absorbing the landscape. As we walk, I imagine that we are the oldest and slowest creatures ever to tread here.

"I'm sorry I've been so distant," I mutter, eyes glued to my snow boots.

I expect a long pause, but it doesn't come. He's thought about this already, clearly more thoroughly than I have. "One's path is one of the most important things in life, and finding it and walking it are two of the most difficult—we have to give ourselves space for them both."

His words are reassuring, and that reassurance makes me feel even guiltier for acting in accordance with them. I don't say anything more.

We've been walking abreast of a small river, which has dug itself a trench, keeping itself ten feet from us both down and across, leaving us with a cliff edge as our guide, Brian on its side of the path. The reflection of the moonlight on the negative space remaining after accounting for the chunks of floating ice lights our surroundings, dancing through the cragged trees as it ripples but marching as it flows, sharing its function with the patches of snow that remain, shrinking imperceptibly but fixed from our countenance. I think about how the river never questions its mission, slowly carving a literal place for itself in the record of the shape of the land, working over the millennia to distance itself by a few feet from Brian and I. It's gone too far for us to call it back now—even a great flood may not enable it to return to us.

Crunch. The dirt path gives way. Brian sinks for a moment, and then he's sliding, then he's falling. He reaches for a tree branch. Misses. Down the small cliff face, through the foliage, and then deposited into the water. Finally, the meeting of his tumbling form with the water kicks me out of my stupor. I jump down, not quite care-

fully enough to ensure that I won't be joining him. I jog along the river bank to match the river's pace, and Brian's. He is stiff, and he doesn't call out for me, but appears to be alive. I outpace him by a few yards and hop into the water, up to my knees.

They say that when met with danger, a person can accomplish extraordinary things, beyond what they ought to be capable of. That their mind and body can direct themselves to their duty and nothing more. This is the only way I can explain how I ended up on the bank, Brian (who greatly outweighs me) lying back, wool coat wet to the point of saturation, coughing, color slowly returning to his face. Thankful for this miracle, I remove his coat and give him my own. Brian melts much faster than the snow banks.

"...Thank you," he manages.

"What else are brothers for?" I reply. His focus returns to his breathing.

Once he is a bit warmer, we retrace our steps home, Brian holding onto my opposite shoulder for support. Our pace is not much slower than it was on the way here.

"I want to help you with your tree farming goals," Brian half-whispers, as he continues to slowly recover.

"Why?" I ask. "You have your own dreams. I don't want you to miss out on yours just to peek a bit closer at mine."

"We're better when we stick together. Better people. I still want to build my giant stones, but I want a part of you to be with me. And I want a part of me to be with you. Even if we don't take each

other's dreams, imagine what we could do with just a little help from each other." Though he is struggling to keep moving, his countenance is almost relieved; perhaps that he's been considering telling me this for a long time, and this moment finally gave him the proof he needed that it was something that should be said, rather than just a passing feeling, potent but liable to sour.

"That's beautiful," I reply. "And you're right. Alone is no way to change the world. It's barely a way to change yourself, and God knows we'll need plenty of that." We share a weak chuckle. "I'll always let you into my story—I know you're looking to make it a good one. Promise."

Finally, we arrive back at his door. When we enter, his family is asleep. He appears to be recovering well, and we figure it's not worth waking them up just to worry them. I take most of myself with me as I go, leaving—for the first time in a while—a little bit behind.

Chapter 3

One day, my search for meaning takes me past the town square, past the school, past the mill and the pond, all the way up by the forest that lies between us and the neighboring town. Here, tucked behind a hill, the commune of shepherds can be found. A small row of houses. A small building holding food, tools, and other goods: the shepherds occasionally send someone along the winding dirt path into the town square to buy, sell, and promptly return home.

The shepherds have lived here at least as long as anyone I know can remember. And although most shepherds I have met are very friendly, and would often set a very low price on their wool, I understand why they live so far from their neighbors. I have had friends who became shepherds, often leaving behind old professions, friends, partners. It's a very strange thing to witness. From a perfectly healthy and content individual slowly starts to develop a cloud of disillusionment: a blankness behind the eyes and a despair behind the breast pocket. They become more active in every as-

pect of their life, at work, with friends, family, but slowly become more frustrated with each. Sometimes there is then a period of silence; they become motionless, never speaking unless spoken to, hardly eating, confining themselves within their bedroom if they can afford to do so. Then they mutter an announcement of their departure to their friends or spouse or those they work with, pack their things, and head up the winding path to the shepherds' commune. Many never return, except to return to sell their wool, assuming that nobody in town has reason to chase them away on sight. Some return after some time—weeks, months, years—but act almost as if they had never left. This causes people to fear the shepherds. They are seen by many as demons, sirens, captors, who have stolen their friends and families away and poisoned the wells of thought from which we drink. Though the shepherds seem happy in their pocket in the hills, I don't know whether they would be met with open arms were they to move closer to town.

But the shepherds are also very talented and disciplined people. Without visiting their home, you might not expect there to be much to their trade, but they have developed brilliant practices in any craft related to their work: breeding, dog training, botany, and dozens or even hundreds of others.

As I arrive, I wonder whether the same fate which befell many of the shepherds will turn its eye to me. Perhaps there is some remedy. I have come here with a single task, to learn how to honor my mother and do all I can to see that our fam-

ily business does good in the world. I take a deep breath, as if I believed that the air breathed here might somehow have some passing plant or pollen that could protect me, and I take my first steps onto the grounds.

I see a man reading a leather-bound book, cross-legged in the grass, a few feet off the road. He eyes me with vaguely optimistic curiosity, and asks me my business. "I'm looking for advice." He points to the north as his expression wanes. "You're looking for Rachel. She should be out around this time." My thanks are met with a low grunt of acknowledgement. He continues reading.

A few minutes away, I see on a small hill the woman who must be Rachel, who appears to be training her dog. I watch as she contorts her fingers, raises them to her lips, and produces a short whistled melody, eloquent but piercing, that seems to fill the valley, reverberating off the trees and returning to where we stand. The dog responds as if the sound itself moves him, his stream through the air nothing more than a reverberation itself. His motion is swift, seemingly leaving a trail in the mind like a torch being waved around in the night as he leaps into the air as if he can swim through it. There are others on the hill with her, also with dogs. After her demonstration, each of them attempts a similar feat. Each trainer's whistle is unique, though together they resemble harmony more than cacophony, an orchestra to which the dance of these beasts is set. Rachel walks among them, providing each with small suggestions, with words of wisdom.

I don't need to ask for her attention. Once I am near, she immediately comes to me with a warm greeting, asking me what brings me to the commune.

"I need to learn how to run my family business," I respond, "but my mother did not have enough time to tell me how. It's important to me that I learn and do all I can. I want to help keep people healthy, and I want to honor her legacy, but the next harvest is only a few months away. I feel lost." I also feel a sense of guilt for wasting Rachel's time—like I'm pulling her away from following her own path even only for this short conversation.

Her expression, however, is attentive. Perhaps she finds something important even to herself in speaking with me, though surely I bring nothing to her that has never crossed her mind. "How have you been preparing for your new responsibility?"

I show her my mother's red notebook and the book on botany that I've been working my way through. "I have things to learn, but I still feel like there's something else I should be doing."

"You've been doing all of this by yourself?" she asked, as she scratched her dog behind its ear. "That sounds awfully lonely." As we spoke, the other trainers shared kind, playful words with each other, and my heart ached to find my fellow trainers.

I think about my mother's letters, which she shared with other tree farmers in Circe throughout her life. Despite the fact that tree farming is a somewhat solitary profession, or perhaps because of it, those who find themselves in it have cultivated a

very close-knit community from afar. Though we did not otherwise receive much mail when I was young, I remember on many occasions coming home to an overflowing mailbox, and knowing that something notable had happened among the tree farmers. Though much of this news was related to tree farming, all those passionate about the community—of whom there were many—would share their births, their deaths, their marriages, and their personal projects. My mother would tell people about her town more than most; moreover, she would often draw sketches of the townspeople who she had been talking to at the time. Though it would often take hours, drawing the same sketch many times to send to everyone she wanted to share it with, it was one of her favorite pastimes when foul weather came. She only made a few trips in her life, but most of those she made were to visit these tree farmers, and though she had many friends back home, she would speak often and fondly of her visits, and the importance of this community to her.

"My mother knew many tree farmers in Circe, I suppose," I tell Rachel. "I can write them. But I have much more to learn about what good work looks like, and I worry I won't be able to learn it from a letter."

"Good work can take many forms. Is there anywhere you can go to meet more tree farmers?"

"The offices of the Department of Agriculture in the capitals have hundreds of tree farmers and scientists. But they're two weeks' journey from here."

"That's not far at all! And there will be many tree farmers on the way as well, no?" she retorts. "You are looking to understand your path. I think that if you can spare the time to find it, then you will know how to seek the purpose and happiness you desire."

The next day, I pack my things for a trip east to the capitals.

Before I leave town, I make sure to say goodbye to my friends, my teachers, and the same shopkeepers who watched over me when I used to try to run from the world. My last destination is Brian's home.

"Don't worry; I haven't forgotten my promise," I tell him. "My journey will make its way back to your ear. If I don't return, I'll write. And I'd better hear back!" He smiles. I squeeze his shoulder. "I'll bring you all of Circe; in return I want you to help me figure out what's inside."

"That seems like a pretty easy offer to take up!" he jokes as his eyes begin to water.

"Then I guess you've got no choice." We share one more hug.

From Brian's house, I take the path past the town square, past the school, past the mill and the pond, past the shepherd's commune, into the forest and towards the capitals.

Chapter 4

Many people from Farmer's Berry never take the long marked dirt path, the only one that leads out of town. Some never even make it to the shepherds' commune, which acts as a gateway, the last chance to turn back for those content to savor life in their hometown, or those afraid to leave it. I have visited a few of our neighboring towns in either direction along the path, as far as a few days' walk. The family of one of my childhood friends sells blackberries and would travel many miles to sell them, and as a child I asked to tag along on a couple of these trips. I loved seeing the windmills in Eagon, commanding with insatiable appetite the short-and-stout landscape of rolling hills of sugarcane; the fish market along the water in Northcott with its cacophonous percussion music of *splats* and *thunks* and shouts and pops of silence; the beautiful fields of flowers in Huneke whose seeds were carried by prevailing winds, growing in a rainbow-like pattern, with streaks of dark purple painted on smears of blue and marbled patches of green and vermillion. But I never found anything

truly foreign. That is, I found myself fascinated with them in the same way that I would be fascinated with something new in my own town: new, but surrounded by the familiar. I was grounded by these things that were the same: the town squares, the small restaurants, children running and playing games, blue skies, big trees, friendly faces.

Our nation mostly consists of small towns, save for the two capitals, one economic and one legislative. This will be my first trip to see them; they're many miles to the east. I have food, clothes, money to get there and back, my mother's two notebooks, a third black notebook for anything else I need to write, a big backpack to hold it all, and not much else. Though I believe I may find my kin in the capitals, the rest of my trip—and in some ways the rest of my life—is uncertain. I can only hope that this trip helps me find answers.

The walking is peaceful. My head begins to clear for possibly the first time since my mother's passing. I do not need to make any decisions except to breathe. Birds pass by overhead. A cool breeze protects me from the heat which is slowly returning to the air as the summer months approach.

The first leg of my journey takes only five hours, depositing me in the town of Wellerman, built entirely along the Great River. As with many towns at the beginning of my journey, Wellerman is also home to a tree farm, run by a man named Darren, who I have never met. From what I remember from his letters, he has two children and loves carving (though a better word might be "sculpting") them small toys out of his trees' soft,

pliable wood. He is not hard to find: a tree farm comprises a large plot of land, and the first person I meet is able to give me directions to the one in town. When I arrive, I explain to him that I'm the son of the tree farmer Elizabeth, that I'm traveling to the capitals in search of meaning, and that I hope to find some along the way as well. I ask if I can stay with him.

"I got your letter about her passing," he says, gesturing for me to take a seat at his dinner table, as he takes a seat as well. "What a terrible shame. Liz was a great woman: we loved getting her letters, and we loved having her when she visited. What a ray of light."

"I appreciate you saying so, and for letting me stay. I promise I won't overstay my welcome."

"I believe that would be nearly impossible," he offers. "Nobody should have to take that on so young, I would be honored to help smooth your way as much as I can while you're here."

We speak for a while about the trade itself. I show him what I've learned over the last few months, diagrams and sketches and rubrics and lists and lists and lists and lists, my mother's red book and my black one, which I've scribbled some notes in about what I've been studying about the trade. He seems impressed. "You're a quick lad."

"Just doing what I can, sir."

As we go, he points at various pictures or paragraphs. He will mention something he's learned about the concept, or some new intuition that I haven't seen. He's a comparatively young man,

hardly thirty. He's very humble for someone who clearly knows so much.

"I see so much of Liz in you," he says, "but you've got something different too. A hunger."

I bring my eyes up to his, lifting my gaze from the table, insulted on her behalf. She understood what was valuable to her, but whether it was part of her profession or not, she always gave it the attention and perseverance it deserved. As someone who received frequent letters from her from miles away, he ought to know that she was just as passionate as I was. "Her life was very well-considered" is all I can think to say in response.

"It absolutely was. And it seems yours will be as well."

After a good night's rest, we have some breakfast, and Darren offers to take me out to the farm. The spring air is crisp. Not much sound enters from outside the farm: birds are singing, leaves rustle. The air smells earthier than I expect, even given the time of year. As I look past the gray trunks, I see: each of the largest branches is striped with eyes of bright sage-colored moss. By making small cuts in these stronger branches, which were referred to as "gills" thanks to their shape, the moss has more healthy wood to grow on, which helps with yield. We have a few of these trees at home, but the process is new: we only learned about it last year. This summer, the season in which the gills are the safest for the tree, we gilled the trees for the next two

years of our harvest, and I planned to gill two more years of branches upon my return. The longer the gills are present, the healthier the moss can grow, but two years at a time seemed very respectable as far as I understood. "This is a lot of gills. How many harvests worth of them have you done?"

"They're all done, but it definitely wasn't easy. How many have you done on your farm?"

"Two," I replied. "You gilled ten harvests in one year?"

"I do remember Liz saying that the process was going a bit slower at your place, but I imagine you had... more important things going on last year. All in due time."

I take a deep breath to clear my head, though the intense smell of the moss keeps it from being particularly effective. I thought that no farm was cutting more than two years worth of gills this summer. I plan to gill more this summer, as I'll have plenty of time and the experience will be healthy for me, but I thought we were working as much as anyone else. Of course this last summer was very important to both my mother and I, but we certainly had plenty of idle time when she was still very strong and the days were bright and we didn't do hardly anything at all. Why didn't she spend that time catching up? Why didn't she tell me? Surely this was an important job to her: more and healthier moss means a healthier winter, possibly even a life saved. Wasn't that enough of a call to work a bit harder for a summer?

"Was there some other reason she could have been cutting less?" I offered. "Something about

our climate? Maybe there is something to worry about the moss changing the content of the air too quickly..."

"No, there was nothing like that as far as I heard. She just figured it was alright if things took a bit longer. It's just as you said. Her life was very well-considered."

I take a deep breath, feeling my body compress as my lungs deflate.

I wish I could still ask her.

I ask about the toys he's been working on for his children. He takes me into his workshop. It's messy, but not in a way that would impede his tinkering. Lots of them are ducks: big ducks, small ducks, ducks that waddle, ducks that swim. "They've really been into ducks lately," he explains matter-of-factly.

He pauses and stares past the floor, lost in thought for a moment. "They're nearly too old for them, so I've been making more lately," he says, "before the magic of it is gone. There will always be new magic: they're wonderful kids. But I grew accustomed to the old one."

After talking a bit more, I am situated in the spare room. I plan to continue my journey in the morning.

I begin the next day meandering around Wellerman, but don't do so for long. The town square is busy in mid-morning, but everything moves slowly: there are lines outside of the restaurants

serving breakfast, shopkeepers lost in conversations, workers taking long breaks to watch the clouds roll by.

I find it hard to imagine people moving so slowly having the same sense of purpose that I've felt, but I suppose life is long: purpose can take many forms, and surely over time the best way to fulfill it can change, thoroughly and fundamentally.

Regardless, I soon find myself wondering what the shepherds here are up to. I approach the blacksmith: he has spoken to more passersby than anyone I have seen, so perhaps he would know what's going on about town. I walk over to his booth. "How's it going, stranger?" he bellowed. "What brings you to Wellerman? Do you need any tools? Any help getting around town?" His smile extends from ear to ear, and his eyes glint in the sunlight; two small, soft, deep oases on his otherwise soot-caked visage.

"I'm just passing through, taking a trip to the east. Do you happen to know where the shepherds live? I believe I may have some business with them."

His expression changes very subtly, almost imperceptibly: as if the depth in his eyes had been flattened. He maintains his big smile. "Of course, my friend! They can be found just a half-mile north of here." I thank him energetically and make my way up. I hear happy *clangs* emanating from his booth as I walk away.

When I arrive, I receive a similar introduction to the one I received when visiting the shepherds in

my town: genuine and warm while also being professional. In fact, there are a lot of similarities between the shepherd communes. The way they conduct themselves, handle projects, solve problems, decide on their goals, determine diets. Though it's hard to find fault in many of their practices, I can understand why many perceive shepherding as almost a religion.

After explaining my quest, I am introduced to Daniel. I keep my story short, which I assume he will appreciate, but I do tell him a bit more about my visit with Rachel.

"I'm glad to hear Rachel is well. I'm sure she didn't mention this, but she's the one that designed this fence. We just finished installing it yesterday. It uses less material, but it's a good deal stronger." He leans on the fence. It's assembled in a unique triangular pattern which I haven't seen before.

Daniel tells me a bit more about his affinity for the shepherds in Farmer's Berry, but gets quickly down to business.

"You're doing the right thing talking to people, relying on them," he says. "Someday they will rely on you too, and I think much of your purpose will be found. We depend on others depending on us."

I think about my mother's letters. She relied on people, and they relied on her, but rarely was there a sense that anything serious would go wrong if things went a bit slowly, or if something wasn't done just right; the stakes never felt very high. I wonder why she chose these kinds of friendships. I want to ask Daniel for answers, but I know he

won't have them. None of my questions look forward: all of them look back.

Daniel insists that while I'm here I stay for lunch, and I oblige. As if on cue, we hear a *whoop* coming from the dining hall, and all of the shepherds pack their things and make their way to the large wooden structure. Daniel mentions that there is actually a library of "calls," which are just different patterns of hollers, which every shepherd learns so as to share basic information with each other over long distances. They also learn how to change their voice to be powerful and shrill enough to cross the mountains. "But we've never had to do that," he conceded.

While I expect lunch to be some sort of tasteless gruel, I am somewhat pleasantly surprised. While certainly somewhat basic—mutton, potatoes, carrots, peas, onions, corn—it was well-seasoned and pretty enjoyable. I could imagine becoming apathetic to it over time, but not exhausted by it. It was also very hearty. Of course.

We are situated at three very long wooden picnic tables. I am enthusiastically welcomed: they seem excited to have someone new to talk to. Most assume I am a new shepherd, but they grow more intrigued when I tell them that I'm still planning on working in the tree-farming business.

"It's great to have an outsider who's interested in what we're doing," Daniel interjects. "We don't have the best press, so I'm glad you were able to see something in us. What do you think of what you've seen of the business?"

"I think it's as good as any, I suppose. I definitely have a lot to learn here."

He laughs, a bit awkwardly. "Well, that's good at least. Has everyone been friendly?"

"Very much so."

He smiles. "Well, I'm rooting for you. You'll have to stay strong out there."

What a strange thing to say. "Did you used to be a tree farmer?" I ask. "I don't meet many people with strong opinions about our profession back home."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean any offense by it. I don't actually think I've ever met a tree farmer before. But the world out there can be rough. It can be hard to keep the same energy I see in you."

"How so?" I ask, prompting him to tell me his story.

* The Legend of Daniel *

Daniel's first day teaching history was somewhere among the best days of his life. And every day he worked at the school for the subsequent fifteen years, the job was as great as the day he arrived. His childhood best friend, Andrea, began her job teaching literature on the same day, in the adjacent room. They would walk to work together, discussing lesson plans, gossiping about students, and planning events to keep the children excited and engaged. They were voracious: they did the work of ten without hardly batting an eye, and the children—and their parents, and the other teachers—loved them for it.

In one of his many conversations with the headmaster, he mentioned a new curriculum that he had been developing, curious about her opinions on it.

"You're already doing so much this year," the headmaster noted, shifting in her big chair. "Are you sure you have the time? I know you love it here, and we love you for it, but make sure to spend some time on yourself."

"That's what I'm doing," Daniel replied. "This is where I find joy."

The headmaster rested her elbow on her desk and her chin on her palm, her lips slightly pursed, her brow slightly furrowed, as if Daniel was a puzzle she had been tasked with solving. "Do you ever find joy in rest? In taking a day to step back?"

"Not particularly."

She resumed her gaze out the window for another moment, then seemed to shelve her puzzle, returning to talk of new teachers, her upcoming trip to visit her distant family members, and other humdrum. Walking down the hallway back to his classroom, he smiled and shrugged off the strange interaction.

But as the years continued, that conversation would often return to his memory. He started to notice how he walked into work a bit more quickly than his peers. How nobody else thought about their work after leaving the building. His coworkers' passion was strange to him: it was strong, but it was also easy to interrupt. When someone would mention their hobbies, their romantic escapades, their "life outside," he found himself masking frustration; the more time consuming the pastime, the more frustrating it was. He saw talent in them—that with more effort, their students could be the best-educated this side of the Great River, and that they could all go on to live exceptional, beautiful lives. His spine would twitch a bit whenever someone mentioned optimistically how everything was "just fine" or how they were "completely satisfied" with their work. He was never satisfied.

Not everyone he knew frustrated him so. He found respite in Andrea, and in two other teachers who also had this fire within them. They bought new books, found occasions to cook exquisite meals for all the students, and had conversations with the students to help them find resources to learn more about their own passions, their own goals, their own legends. It was a pleasure to work so seamlessly with them, the four of them acting as one, a bird freed from a cage. Watching them speak, one could see clouds forming, until *CLAP!,* a strike of lightning, a plan carried out swiftly and effortlessly.

There was no facet of administering the school that they did not touch. Nobody minded too much when they had peculiar suggestions: though they did not always agree with the other faculty, they went out of their way to make sure everyone was heard. In fact, people were pleased overall: not only did they make plenty of improvements to the children's and teachers' experiences, but also it meant that the "normal" faculty were accosted with their fanatical plans and requests for "just a little bit of help" much less often.

With these three at his side, Daniel felt valuable for many years. They had amalgamated themselves so many times that the effect had begun to become permanent, and had snuck its way from their passions into the rest of them. But they were not always alone, and Daniel had never been cured of this frustration he often found with the others. He wondered: "if this is what I can do with three by my side, what could I do with a real team?" And

soon the time came, as it does for all, for Daniel to question what he was doing with his life - to determine where he wanted to be, and to ask himself whether the foolhardy crashing-around of adolescence had found it for him in his profession.

Then one year, the day after school let out, he walked past the town square, past the school, past the mill and the pond, and all the way up by the forest at the edge of town to the shepherds' commune in search of answers. When he explained his plight to them, they said little, only offering for him to join them. He was permitted to stay as long as he desired, so long as he left when he was done. He resolved to stay for the entire summer to solve his problem - the school had been generous enough to let him know that if he did not return, they would find a replacement for him.

The work was boring, and he understood little of it. "This life is not meant for me," he would often think to himself as he was shearing sheep or building fences. The fruits of this labor were simply less appealing to him than the look on the face of a child who's just learned something new. And he was being worked to his physical limits: every evening after dinner when he returned to his quarters, he would be consumed by his bed, taken from consciousness before he could even savor the feeling of the cool sheets on his skin. But his time was not finished.

As the weeks passed, he did become more skilled. The incessant commands were now sometimes accompanied by praise - "I'm sure the weaver will be pleased to see this," "These sheep will be

able to rest easy with you to protect them," or even the simple "nice work." He slowly found the smiling faces he had been missing before: that is, the knowledge of the people he was helping, his sense of purpose.

Once he had found these again, he found himself to be in paradise. His whole world, though now consisting only of a few hectares, now conspired with him. He studied the history of breeding practices and mapped the contours of all of the nearby hills and fields while he thought about his old students wearing a wool coat he had had a hand in, or savoring a feast of lamb. He was no longer always the biggest in the room, the loudest voice, the fastest horse - in fact he often relished the feeling of realization upon walking into a room that he was quite small.

When the summer ended, he returned to the school to let them know that he would be leaving permanently. The news came as a surprise only to three people, his confidants, who had been certain that he would never find the joy in the hills that he had shared with them in the schoolhouse. He of course tried to convince them to join him, but knew that without what he had seen it would surely be impossible, and he left for the hills on his own.

Part of their confidence was warranted. As Daniel began his new life, he often grieved his old one. But as much as it broke his heart to leave, it also would have broken his heart to stay. As he put it: "When I began my career it was an uphill

battle. The year I realized it was an impossible one was the year I left."

He would often take trips to the market to sell lamb. These trips took on a regular schedule, which he shared with Andrea. He would bring two short stools along during his visits, one for each of them. They would spend the day shaded by a small canopy, squatting on their short stools, alternating between talking among themselves and discussing prices and quality with customers - which she quickly picked up well enough that many believed her to be a shepherd herself. Through their talks they knew each other's friends, struggles, hopes and dreams. Years passed, and though she visited less often, and the gaps in their conversation began to hang more heavily in the air, they never lost the unspoken bond between their souls. She would tease him about his new profession, especially as she departed. They never stopped these meetings, but Daniel often recalled one of these goodbyes more vividly than the others. That day, as he began to pack up, and she got up to walk away, she smiled mischievously as she often would, but her eyes seemed a bit cloudier than usual as she delivered her goodbye: "if your wax wings ever melt, I'll be here."

Chapter 5

After my lunch with Daniel, I begin my journey east. I leave Wellerman with answers to many of the questions I had before, but also with new questions I never thought I'd have to ask. I can't stop thinking about part of my conversation with the tree farmer:

"Her life was very well-considered."

"It absolutely was."

I see now that she understood her time spent with people as part of her duty. She had two jobs as a person: one to help others in her work, and one to help others in the rest of her life. I worry about my own ability to properly respect both of these: do I have the same fortitude, the same tenacity, that she did?

The trip to the next town is a three-day journey—there will be plenty of time to clear my head, to figure a way forward. The clouds are high, and I leave with determination - even if not with direction.

The trail mainly follows along the river, with a few inlets into the forest. Though there are no

towns on this leg of the journey, small shelters (spartan, but enough to stave off the elements) have been put in place along the trail to provide a safe night's sleep for travelers. I don't see many others on the first day of this leg. I find kinship with the birds: skittering about, quickly but without much direction, much like myself. Some will often come closer to me, hopping along the ground or flying around my head to see me from various angles. I feel comforted, and I'm grateful for their selflessness, even if unintentional - I wish I had something to offer them in return. They continue with me for most of the day, until the sun sets, when they return to their nests, and I arrive at the first shelter on the trail.

Though I am well prepared, I feel nervous about my first night on the trail. This is my first time traveling solo, and I've never stayed in one of these shelters. I worry that I'm missing something important, that there's something I'm not ready for. *You have plenty of food, you are right by the river, the shelter is safe,* I repeat to myself as I drift to sleep.

Despite my concerns, I wake up refreshed. I have a small pastry for breakfast, which I eat while overlooking the water. The sun has scarcely crept above the horizon, and the river moves slowly and is clear enough that I can see some fish swimming by the river bank. Today's path goes a bit further into the forest for a bit longer - this is a popular spot to forage for mushrooms, so the trail passes through places where they're more likely to be found.

People in Farmer's Berry rarely venture out into the forest, so I'm alert as I continue forth. I've learned a few safety tips from those who dub themselves adventurers, but I still feel unprepared. I suppose now there's not much I can do about it until I reach the next town—

I see something reflect the sunlight off in the distance, small and glossy - an eye. It's gone as soon as it arrives, before I can be sure that I even saw it. I hear leaves rustle gently from that direction. I decide to assume that it's nothing: if I jump every time the wind blows then I might never finish the trail. I continue forward.

About thirty seconds pass - I'm beginning to count them, I notice. The leaves rustle again. I start to walk a bit faster. Another fifteen seconds pass. I hear it again - this time I'm certain it's getting closer. I realize that I'm already practically running.

I try to remember how I'm supposed to handle the situation. My bag likely smells of food. Are you supposed to walk slowly, or run as fast as you can? I know someone told me, but my mind is blank. I toss my bag, trying to get it as far from me as possible with as unthreatening and fluid of a motion as I can manage, and continue at my pace.

Bears can climb trees. They can run fast. I'm not very strong. I won't be able to fight it. I manage to get some distance between me and my bag and I begin to sprint.

The rustling leaves get louder and faster, until they turn into discrete footsteps *pat pat pat pat pat thump thump THUMP THUMP THUMP BAM!*

I wake up. I'm on the ground. Silence. No—I hear small insects buzzing near my head. Birds chirp at a distance. I hear the gentle hum of the forest. I break the suction of my eyelids and look around. The light passes lazily through the trees, diffracting into brilliant greens and yellows and browns. There's a little pain in my gut. A lot of pain. I can't bring myself to look. I rest a few more moments.

I appear to be completely intact. When I have the strength, I stand up, leaning on a tree trunk. I must have run into a tree trying to escape and knocked myself out. Finally I remember: I was supposed to play dead. I was lucky to be knocked unconscious then, I suppose. I hobble over to where I threw my backpack, where thankfully it still lies. Soon my wits are back about me, I get back on the trail. I want to get out of these woods as soon as possible.

The sun isn't quite where it was last I remember. How many hours have passed? Two? Three? I suppose it doesn't matter, as I'm less concerned about getting to the shelter quickly as I am arriving in one piece. I keep walking - I seem to be more aware of my surroundings, but feel less equipped to handle them. These sensations swirl together, my thoughts congealed into a thick, uniform, liquidy paste, too well-distributed to be able to extract any one feeling.

I finally arrive at the shelter as the sun is beginning to set. I unpack and eat. Deep breath in.

Deep breath out. I could have avoided this. I could have prepared better. I won't let something like this happen again.

The next day, in the late morning, I complete my journey through the forest, arriving in the town of Bodden. My first stop in Bodden is the market, where I replenish my supplies. Bodden is an industrial town, known mainly for metalwork and for their large brick factory. The air is earthy, but in a different hue than the moss-filled air of the tree farm in Wellerman. It's a bit dustier, more like clay. The entire market here is contained in a single large building: merchants still set up small booths, but do not need to worry about rain or snow. Though the sunlight is obscured closer to the center of the building, it is still fascinating to see how the shopkeepers can much more easily speak with each other, not needing to separate themselves by walls of cloth. The interior of the market feels almost like a cave with the sunlight retreating and the damp coolness broken only by the warmth of the shopkeepers. Upon buying some more food, I ask the grocer where the local tree farm can be found. He points me towards the home of James, the farm's owner, and I take the long walk out of the building in that direction, eventually finding myself outside, and soon thereafter in the hills.

James is a short, stocky man, maybe in his mid-thirties. He welcomes me in, expresses his condolences for my loss, offers me something to drink. I show him first my black notebook. He slowly nods, contemplative, as he reads.

I ask him to tell me how he became a tree farmer, and what his life looks like now, hoping he will have some of the answers I'm looking for.

* The Legend of James *

Adam and James Lake were born in the town of Bodden. They were the children of tree farmers, and their parents were excited to pass down their business. However, their operation was small, generating only enough income for one family, so it did not make sense to pass the business down to both children. Adam being the elder, it was promised to him.

Both children were very proud Lakes, each raised with their own responsibility to the world: Adam's of carrying on the family business, and James's of making a name for himself. However, from their youth it was clear that Adam was more passionate than his brother. Though "tree farmer" was not a particularly prestigious title in Bodden—likely less so than "entrepreneur" or "paper maker" or many of the others that James considered—he was delighted to be able to shoulder the yoke of duty and come into his family name. Adam spent long hours studying and practicing his craft, ending many of his days exhausted, but he enjoyed watching his abilities slowly align with his future ti-

tle. And though James was happy for his brother, he had no desire to take his place. He was a quieter boy, bright but happy to lean whichever way the wind took him. And lean he often did: as he looked for a profession to take on, he would often visit foundries and warehouses based on where his friends were, rather than what disciplines he found himself interested in.

Indeed, even though he saw no tree farming in his future, James would often work alongside Adam, as he was his closest friend. They would go out to the farm with a set of tools, usually looking for the smallest trees to avoid causing too much trouble, and would practice using them the way they had seen their parents do, sharing with each other any tips they were learning while they practiced. They would read passages from botany books and then test each other on their knowledge. Though Adam was passionate, it could not be denied that James was very talented in many ways at the craft - more so than Adam, even.

But James knew that the farm wasn't his place - he never truly loved it the way Adam did, so it should go to Adam. And so, as they aged, James inevitably began his departure from Adam, that is, from the tree farm. He got his first job at a paper mill. As with all of the other professions he had tried, he never had a passion for the work, but he could stay quiet and keep to his devices while on the job. He found new friends, and they became close confidants. They gave him life and he reciprocated.

But he stayed very close with his brother. He knew that Adam was doing something important, both to the world and to Adam himself. But as time progressed, Adam found himself more overwhelmed with work. He would go between a deep pit when he felt he was losing control and a great joy when he felt he was gaining it back. The harvest was an especially difficult time for him. In their day, there was a short period when the wood of the trees was turned into pulp and used to pack wounds, which for Adam meant that he had to pulp felled branches and trees himself rather than taking them to the forest where they would decompose quickly after they had died. Adam was able to finish the job every year, but his work was not always of the highest quality. This work was more than he had felt ready for. He tried everything he could to reclaim his fire. He spent more time outside of work to get back in touch with the thrill of life; he spent less time outside of work to try to give himself the time he needed to finish his work well; he spoke with friends; he spoke with elders. But nothing seemed to work. He still found his job important, but it began to drain him, and he began to feel less of the joy that he once did. Though James and Adam sometimes felt less connected in these days, when Adam was often preoccupied, James stuck by his side.

"I thought I would be able to find my footing," Adam said to him one day, as they shared a meal of lamb and rice. "I spent my childhood working hard, but I thought that one day everything in this job would come naturally to me. I knew I wasn't

the strongest, but I thought time would eventually show me favor... But it just hasn't happened."

James washed down a bite of lamb with some wine. "What do you want to do about it?"

"What else can I do?" Adam sighed. "I have to keep pushing. There's nowhere to go but forward."

"If you want out, I would be willing to step in. You have shared so much of your work with me, and I'm a fast learner. And I don't think the paper mill would notice I was gone," he joked.

Adam put down his fork to hold his head. He paused, knowing what he wanted to say but struggling to summon the strength to say it. "It wouldn't be right. If I were to leave now, to throw away all of that time, that training that could have been spent on someone else, then everything would be lost."

"Not everything," James replied, his low voice raising slightly in pitch to offer a touch of optimism. "Time maybe. But you would still have you; you would still have me; you would still have a life ahead of you."

Though Adam continued to work for many months after this conversation, he would eventually take James up on his offer. Adam would take a job at the brick factory, the largest establishment in town, where he would make a modest living. As they both knew would be the case, Adam did not love the brick factory as he did the tree farm. And though James believed he did what was best for his brother, he often still felt a twisted sense of regret for taking that love away from him, in part perhaps because James loved the job too. But he

knew whether Adam loved the farm was irrelevant: Adam had run his course on the farm, or perhaps it had run its course within him, and it was revealed that he was not meant to work on the farm forever, and this transition was simply that fact manifesting itself.

Chapter 6

James's story leaves me with lots of questions.

"So what was it that made Adam leave his job in the end?" I begin.

"What do you mean?"

"Did he want to respect the world and improve the quality of the work, or was it to salvage his own happiness?"

"He had the luxury of choosing both."

"But which was more important?" I insist. When hard times come, I want to know: how much is worth sacrificing to save my own happiness? Even if you *feel* like you can't do any more, this usually just means that there's an amount of pain associated with continuing that you're unwilling to stomach.

James purses his lips, shifting in his seat, looking down at his coffee and then quickly returning his gaze to me. He leans towards me - he's an imposing figure, and I lean back a bit reflexively. "The latter." I look away from his piercing eyes. He continues. "I saw my brother go through a job that he thought he couldn't leave. When you think you're

the only one who can do what you do, and whatever you're doing absolutely must be done, then you have to do what you can; you put work first and loving your work second. But most people aren't in that position. And if you're not, then you start with love. And starting with love means not being afraid to leave.

"You're clearly passionate about tree farming. But if you find yourself feeling disillusioned, feeling like it's just a source of funding for the rest of your life as opposed to a life in itself, then you need to step back. That can mean leaving entirely like it did for my brother, or it can mean doing a bit less to focus on yourself. I've done that, and I think that if I hadn't my farm wouldn't be as successful as it is."

This makes me think of all the things that James could accomplish if he truly found his work to be important—if he truly *loved* it. I'm glad that he's found happiness in the rest of his life, of course, but it sounds like he's taking advantage of his talent: he's skilled enough that people *think* he works hard (at least by the metric of his business), but he has much more potential than what they might assume. Imagine how the people would feel if they knew what he was truly capable of! Would the sick turn on him, those who could have been saved if he had given them his heart?

I don't want to disrespect my host, but this is a colleague, and I feel obligated to be honest. "Do you think our work is important?" I ask.

"Of course," he replies. "We've saved many lives, and with luck we will go on to save many

more." He looks out the window, mindlessly twirling his spoon in his coffee, seemingly looking for answers of his own. "Do you think your future in tree farming is destiny?"

"...I suppose so."

"Do you love it?" His eyebrows raise and his head lowers, revealing the front of his balding pate, his eyes inspecting me through the top rim of his glasses, seeming to prepare themselves to determine whether I'm telling the truth.

"I do," I reply plainly. Destiny needs love to grow, doesn't it?

"What do you love about it?"

"I love finishing what my mother started," I reply. "I love connecting with my town when I can distribute moss to them at the end of the harvest. I love making the world a better place the best way I know how."

He nods, appearing unsurprised by my response. "Has that feeling of love ever faded?"

"If it did, then it wouldn't have been love."

He nods. "You're young. The heart has long seasons, and you might not have seen them yet. You remind me so much of my brother at your age. And I want you to take all this love and I want you to use it. But some day it may come to pass that you don't have this thing that you want to call love - you may find out that this passion often departs for a time, and you have to wait for it to return. Do you have a word for a feeling like that, if not love?"

"Infatuation?" is the best I can come up with.

He laughs. "Then harness that infatuation. People change. You will change. But you have this fire within you now. Just know that hard work often acts more as wind than as kindling: some will cultivate a healthy fire, but too much will put it out.

"You know, you should visit my brother. He lives just past the market. A tall, blond-haired fellow with wide eyes—he's hard to miss. When you return, I will have food and shelter prepared for you."

I thank him not only for his hospitality but for his time. "Of course," he replies. "It's very important to find your path, and it's a pleasure to help you do so." I look at him, and for a moment I see Brian. Though this man may not have the answers I'm looking for, I'm honored to be in the company of such kindness.

As I retrace my steps towards the market, I think about his warning, that my flame may not always be what it is now. I think of Daniel's feeling of isolation before he met the shepherds. I think of my own hometown, my need to travel across the nation to find my kin. Maybe he's right, and nothing can be done to stop the change of the seasons, but having a few friends on hand can't hurt either.

Maybe all I'm looking for on this journey is new friends. It's hard to love something alone. If you love a person, and they don't reciprocate, simply going through the motions, then there is no love had but delusion. Love for your work, for the way you help your fellow person, ought to be

shared as well. This love doesn't have to be shared in the same way—an artist can share the love they have poured into their work with those who enjoy it—but it's important to find people to share it with nonetheless.

I pass by a small pond, where a small family of herons, mother and children, hunts for its next meal. They stand nearly motionless, the small, circular patterns of ripples around their legs dwarfed by the gentle shaking of the surface by the breeze; the gently-blowing willow trees look like the most lively creatures in the pond. Suddenly, the mother darts her head in the water: all I see is a small, engineered *splash* in front of her and then a large fish in her mouth. Before she feeds her children, she looks at the largest of her children expectantly. The child looks at the water for a moment. She strikes, but returns to the surface empty-mouthed, only displacing a drop, leaving behind only more ripples. The mother proceeds to feed her other children with the fish she's caught, then looks at the largest child once again. The child stares a bit longer this time, her crest tickled by the wind while she thinks, her gaze determined. *Splash!* She emerges with a small fish, to much liquid fanfare, which briefly soaks her siblings and mother. I continue toward the market, my head a bit lower than before.

I find Adam in the market on my way to his neighborhood. He is in a candy shop looking for a treat for his daughter. He's a bit startled when I get his attention, but very kind. I tell him that I was sent by his brother, that I was told we might

have much in common. That James had said that I was full of passion, but believed it might some day extinguish.

He smiles and grabs my shoulder. He buys a small pastry filled with honey and nuts, exchanges pleasantries with the shopkeeper, and motions for me to follow him out.

I don't have much to ask him about—I'm more interested in seeing what he has to share—so I don't say much. We walk for a good hour, slowly making our way out of Bodden and into the meadows. Eventually we find ourselves at the foot of a particularly tall hill.

"Why did you bring me all the way here?" I ask him.

"Here we will find one of the most important things that I've found in my life," he replies.

We climb to the zenith where he sits cross-legged. I follow his lead. We watch the shadows grow over the hills, enveloping them, and soon thereafter watch the sun set, for a moment shining brilliant rays of light across the evening sky. For a moment, I know peace. We sit for a while after the sun sets, the weather unseasonably warm for spring.

He took me here to share this peace with me, one of his most valuable possessions. I thank him sincerely. "Don't lose yourself, kid" is his only response.

After we return to his home, I continue the rest of the way to James's. Though we don't say much, he seems pleased that I've returned so late. He provides me dinner and a bed, as promised. In the

morning, after breakfast, he sends me on my way, and I begin the final leg of my journey towards the capitals.

Chapter 7

The trip to the capitals takes two additional weeks, and I meet no more tree farmers during this time. I stay in the homes of kind strangers, offering them what I can, be it small sums of money or simply helping with household tasks, though most insist that I can stay without charge.

There are two capitals, North and South Waymont. The northern capital consists largely of government buildings, and the southern capital mainly contains businesses, but there are many exceptions to these rules: South Waymont often attracts young, enterprising folks, looking to make their mark in the world, while those in the North often lead much quieter lives, consequential though they may still be. The Department of Agriculture is mainly situated in the north: here, legislators—largely retired farmers themselves—oversee logistical tasks such as redistributing moss during regional droughts, providing supplies to farmers, and communication of any important notices relevant to the farming community. However, their research building is in the

south. The Shepherds' Collective is in the south as well.

The capitals are the most important leg of my journey. Many of the legislators in the Department of Agriculture are some of most experienced farmers in all of Circe: they will help me find perspective. And the scientists create the state of the art: they will help me find purpose. That said, excited though I may be, this is my first time in the capitals, and may be the last for a while, so I want to explore the city. The Department offers to have someone show me around, to share the history of the city and of the trade of tree farming.

I am introduced to Opal. Opal was a tree farmer for over 40 years, but after the passing of her husband she moved to the capitals to spend her time among more bright-eyed tree farmers. She wears a buttoned flannel shirt and a small barrette which makes a half-hearted effort to tame her embrittling but volcanic curls, which contradict her short stature. She shakes my hand feebly but with intention, a proud but gentle look in her eyes.

The streets are alive from the moment we step out of the Department headquarters. There are couples on morning walks and friends enjoying breakfast at small shops which dot the major thoroughfares, all while the mid-morning light shines over the tops of the small buildings. Though the streets are denser and stretch further, this place still reminds me of home; almost as if Farmer's Berry was a child of North Waymont, birthed at a distance.

As we begin to learn about each other, we begin to pass a number of parks; each with their own statues, fountains, and plaques, celebrating the accomplishments of the nation. I didn't learn much about the landmarks of our nation's capitals in school, and as much as Opal reassures me that I'm far from the first person not to recognize any of the names that are heralded as we walk by, I can't help but feel a bit disappointed. These people ought to be sources of pride for the whole nation, even for us in Farmer's Berry. I take out my notebook and begin to write them down.

"Don't worry," Opal says, a bit amused by my frenzy. "They aren't going anywhere." But she kindly waits as I look over all of the carefully-constructed stone assemblages and their plaques, cataloguing the names of the pieces, their artists, and the epigraphs with which they have been christened:

Leavitt Fountain. Sandra Dayton, Eduardo Nuñez, Lydia Draught. To those back home, who we can never repay.

Ashton Monument. Eli Massey. To many more excellent years, both of this city and all others under its governance.

Statue of Warren Elizondo, First Prime Minister of the Nation of Circe. Fred and Annabeth Wright. The beginning of harmony.

While I appreciate the familiar name in the last of these, the epigraph is puzzling to me. Circe is a harmonious nation, but it hasn't been without its tumult. In fact, its infant years were some of its worst. But I finish jotting it down, and we continue.

I ask her about her experiences seeing the births of some of the marvels of modern industry. She talks still with wonder, recalling the old days as if she were experiencing them for the first time hearing them come from her own voice. I show her some of my notes, eager to show her that I'm learning fast (and that maybe some day I'll be able to contribute to one of those marvels).

"You've got a good head," she says. "When I was your age everyone had everything they needed to invent something new right at home. But nowadays most of the big changes come from the scientists. They have their beakers and chemicals and big machines; it's hard to be an inventor while being a regular farmer anymore. Have you thought about being a scientist?"

"I have. I have to keep my own farm running as well, but I've thought about it. I'll be meeting them soon." She's excited to hear it, and tells me all about Cleo, Oscar, Frank, and all of the other researchers that she's gotten to know better since moving to the capitals.

In fact, as we continue past the parks and on towards somewhere to stop for lunch, we're seldom alone: Opal seems to have made close friends with half the town. We pass many farmers or others

that know her, each of whom she makes sure to introduce me to.

But we never make it to lunch. Before we arrive, she loses her footing, falling onto the cobblestone. She's unconscious. I shout to the man we had just stepped away from. He helps me take her to the nearest hospital...

When she wakes up, I am with her, as are a few friends, one of whom is from the Department. She tells us she feels better, though her voice is weaker than before. I'm a bit worried she may be in worse shape than she is letting on. The physician has yet to see her: he continues working with other patients. She asks how long she's been here. "Not more than a couple hours," one of the friends replies. "You're lucky to be alive." She reassures them that she's going to be just fine, and after sharing some pleasant conversation and ensuring that the physician would be with her soon, they return to their days.

The hospital is well-kept. There are about forty beds in our ward, twenty on each side. It is waist-deep in the emotional weight of the illnesses of its constituents, but the nurses deftly part its waters. It is disheartening to see the number of full beds, but perhaps I'm just not used to the size of the city. Nobody appears to be in immediate danger, which is reassuring, but some folks are definitely still in need.

I see two nurses huddled behind a pillar, quietly sharing jokes. They seem to be in the best mood of

anyone in the room, maybe even better than some of their counterparts who may have the day off. A few moments later, another nurse comes to our bed, and informs us: "The physician will see you next, but he's off to lunch. He will be back in a couple hours." I see him out of the corner of my eye going towards the door for his coat.

Opal is still very weak; she's pale in the face, and though she decries any notion that she's in trouble, I still believe that she needs the physician to see her, and soon. This place is starting to get to me. "Two hours is quite a long lunch, isn't it?" I shout to the physician. "You don't think these people need you? And you," I say, turning my head to the nurses behind the pillar. "Don't you have any self-respect? You don't have any problem letting all this happen, letting these people rot while you turn a blind eye to them?"

The physician turns to me, and I immediately blush from embarrassment. He opens his mouth to speak, but Opal raises her hand: *I can handle him.* He closes it again: he seems to be another of her seemingly countless acquaintances.

"I know you're frustrated," she says, "and that you're only looking out for me. And I know that to you, it's no excuse that their jobs are difficult - you have so much passion, and that's something you should be proud of! It's hard to find a balance between doing enough and keeping yourself happy. But there does have to be a balance. Being happy is the whole reason we try to save lives, isn't it?"

I nod, sunken and small, as the physician huffs and snatches his coat, and as the nurses return to

their patients. “I’m sorry,” I sheepishly squeak out. “I don’t know what to say.” She’s absolutely right: the experiences of any two people are always going to be so drastically different; who am I to say that I understand what one needs to do in order to be effective in their position.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says. “You’re just full of passion. You remind me a lot of myself...”

* The Legend of Opal *

Opal's childhood was marked by tombstones: the small path in her family's cemetery plot grew as she did, twisting and turning through the well-trimmed hedges at a pace which was simultaneously slow and blistering. Her story is not unique: all of the plots grew in this way, blossoming into an intricate, symmetrical stone topiary, making the gravedigger in some ways more of a gardener than the gardener himself. And it was the same in the towns next to hers, and the towns next to those, and so on.

The bitter cold in those days permeated every aspect of one's life, and made its way into the way life was carried out, for better and for worse. Significant birthdays were major affairs, but funerals were often quite short. Fewer trades were entrusted to a single person, to save their knowledge from being wrested from the grip of the desperate town. Life was precious, but it was well-understood that it could also be taken at a moment's notice. And it was hard: society is a carriage with many reins, and in those days they were

often changing hands. But by Opal's time, the bitter cold had already been around for a generation, and people had begun to become accustomed to it.

Though many had tried and failed to find a way to stop the disease, the resolve of the people had not faltered: this pursuit was one of the few vigors spared in this time. In every town across Circe one could find artisan scientists, tinkerers and inventors, gambling their days away with serums and plants and exercises and machines hoping to find the one that would return life to the way their parents remembered it to be. These people were revered in the town as beacons of hope, as talismans of a brighter future.

But their efforts were always in vain. For over a generation, though they were pillars of their societies, they did not make any headway towards their goal. The death tolls continued; people continued their effective tacit acceptance of their plight; and, for the lucky, life went on.

When Opal was a child, she would follow around her local scientist. He was a kind-natured man, and often would teach her and other young disciples what he knew about medicine. He had not been trained in the nation's great universities, but he was very wise. She looked up to him, seeing in him the heroic figure that he was depicted as. Though she didn't care much for notoriety, she still wanted to be a hero herself.

However, when Opal reached adulthood, and it came time to begin forging her own path, the world suddenly changed. News had come of a man in a faraway village who had cured himself

by breathing the air coming from the moss that grew on the norocos tree. And when this discovery reached her home, the town at once began to shed its overgrown skin, as the funerals got longer and the birthdays no longer had that secret bottom layer of sadness that had infected them before. There were no such trees within a hundred miles; in fact they were very rare. But people knew that a new world was coming to be before their very eyes.

The saplings came shortly after the first jars of moss. Though Opal, like the rest of the folks in her hometown, did not know much about botany, she saw her opportunity to be a hero. The town pitched in to buy her a plot of land for the saplings to live on. Thought the plot was very large, and many worried that when it was full she would not be able to handle the burden, she knew that it could be done, and that was as far as she cared.

Her farm began to grow, and as it did she began to spend more time there. Each year the saplings grew another foot taller above her head, and each year she planted more, and in this way the farm slowly enveloped the woman living in the small cottage she had built at its center. In each tree she saw one of her frequent young visitors, that new generation of would-be heroes.

But she herself became harrowed. Her hair became brittle, her eyes clouded, her arms calloused and wrinkled. Her conversations got shorter, and her exhales got longer. She paid the price for her good deeds.

As the years passed, the toll of the bitter cold slowed. Many, especially among the elderly, did

not trust the change, concerned that someday the moss would find a new place to grow, or that the trees would be taken in some natural disaster. But many as well began to place more of their trust in life. The age of not thinking about tomorrow had begun to subside, and in its place grew new kinds of friendships, marvelous works of art, smaller social institutions to complement the larger ones which were the only ones that many people knew.

And as society began to flourish, Opal began to train the next generation of tree farmers. Though the bitter cold still took many lives, it no longer threatened the town that she loved. And as such there was much less she needed to be heroic about, and she could find her way, slowly, steadily, back into the world.

She was accepted with open arms. She moved next to the town square, assured that she no longer needed to work so hard that she had to hide in that cottage in the middle of the farm. She made new friends, found a husband, and spent much of her life befriending her townspeople and sharing her story and expertise with other tree farmers who heard about the woman responsible for the region's largest tree farm and ending the curse that the bitter cold had placed upon it. No more would the people need to strain and suffer the way she had. She would walk through town, enjoying the fruit of her labor: the safe, calm air which now dominated the atmosphere. She could only hope that the next generation would enjoy it in a way she never got to.

Chapter 8

Upon finishing her story, she leans towards me. "You want to be a hero the same way that I did. But times are different. There are more lives to save, but there's room for people to breathe - and that includes you. We aren't at war anymore."

I thank her for her story and wish her well before leaving her. The folks at the Department have agreed that they will continue to check on her and see to it that she recovers well.

Before I return to the Department for the evening, I return to the parks. Reminded of my mother, I begin to sketch the monuments that we passed underneath where I had written their inscriptions. I look forward to showing them to my friends in Farmer's Berry. I wonder if Brian will see himself in them. After a few sketches, the sun sinks towards the horizon, and I am nudged by it to make my way back.

On my second day, I venture to South Waymont to speak with the scientists there. Though

the two cities are so close, they do not blend into each other: between these two bustling populaces is a short stretch of empty fields. Here the corridors of wind caused by the lattice of throughways subsides, and there is only a mild breeze. Dandelions and sunflowers dot the sides of the path. Though a few people are walking by, perhaps to deliver important items and documents, it is mostly quiet. I expected a calm environment in this passageway, but tension radiates from the few travelers I see; it clouds the air, inescapable.

Soon enough, I arrive in South Waymont. The buildings are tall, some five or six stories, and there are many monuments. It is much more active than its northern sibling: there are newsstands with salesmen calling out to pedestrians; large signs for various goods; and lots of people bustling about, all seemingly almost late to something. But if not for the sun in the sky and their hurried paces, you might think by the looks on the people's faces that they're winding down for the day, rather than starting it. As if they're winding down from the previous days, weeks, years, decades behind them, made a singular, monotonous whole by a refusal to look more than a foot in front of their own faces. For their own sakes I wished they would realize that even small moments spent gazing out across the skyline would not only improve their lives but their work as well.

On a street corner, I find a large bronze map on a marble table outlining the layout of the city. It is easy to read and beautifully arranged, with some small replicas of the city's major features protrud-

ing from the plate. It makes the city feel peaceful, almost deceptively so. Upon consulting it, I make my way to the scientists' building.

It's magnificent, like the buildings around it, with a statue of Demeter displayed prominently atop a recess in the building on the fifth floor. I enter and let them know who I am. They say that they've been expecting me, and that I will have an hour to speak with the team. I'm a bit disheartened; I'm not sure it will be enough to get what I need. Two folks in white coats appear, leading me to the stairway.

The moment I arrive on the main research floor, my worries melt away. This place is a temple. There are instruments I've never seen and can't even name; hundreds of people in white coats, working on projects that my books and I could never fathom in ten lifetimes; dozens and dozens of laboratories, all working to improve the lives of people's loved ones, and their children, and their children's children. As we walk I begin furiously writing in my notebook. I am led from room to room, I'm given explanations, I ask quick questions, get quick answers. Time races.

After much of our time has elapsed, I'm taken to the "moss seeding" laboratory—they study small changes in wood grain and texture which affect how moss clings to it. I'm excited—my mother studied this in great detail from our dining room table, and I had learned a good deal about it from her. In fact, a couple years before she died, she sent a letter to the folks here in this room sharing some of her findings, though they hadn't gotten around

to telling her their thoughts from it (though they sent letters expressing their sincerest apologies regarding their delay). Seeing the place, I'm honored to know that my mother knew these people.

When I introduce myself to the folks working in the lab, they recognize my last name and express their condolences. Though I ask them about my mother's studies, they're clearly much more interested the letters she sent them over the years. "Come here," one of them says to me, gesturing me to follow her. I'm brought to a space on the far wall, next to a collection of charts, lists, and diagrams. In its center is a note written on pastel-blue paper in immaculate handwriting:

> Dear Seeding Researchers,
>
> I hope this letter finds you well. In this envelope you will find data from my latest experiments, as well as drawings of some of my neighbors. I have told them about the work you are doing. They are all very proud of the things you are doing for Circe. Remember that you are doing what you do to help us and Circe, but we're hoping that you do what you can to help yourselves as well.
>
> Best,
> Elizabeth Schafer

Beneath the letter are dozens of drawings of people I know: our friends, our neighbors, their

families, our butcher and street sweeper. I've never gone so long in my life without seeing any of them. The drawings aren't perfect replicas of the people they're depicting, but they're breathtaking nonetheless—you can feel their souls in each stroke of the pencil.

Tucked in the corner, I find a picture of myself. I remember her drawing pictures like this while I worked. I hadn't even asked to see it.

"We love Elizabeth," the scientist says to me. "Without her this place would not be what it is. I wouldn't be who I am, at the very least. I spend a little time every day trying to be a bit more like her."

I raise a finger in apology and tilt my head away as tears begin to well and release themselves from my eyelids and down my face. There are so many things that can never be replaced with her gone. Parts of my heart, and parts of so many others'. I try to pull myself back together, knowing our time is short. The scientist gives me a hug. I ask if we can talk about her work: I think that for the moment I need to focus on something that will keep her here. They oblige.

They grab the top page from a stack of papers on the table below the drawings and the letter; all of the letters in the stack appear to be scientific questions from her. They go through pieces of it with me. They note to me that, though her tongue is not always particularly scientific, her methods still appear to be sound and insightful. They ask me about some of the information she's collected, and some of the conditions of our farm,

to learn more about her experiments. They seemed pleased, or as pleased as furrowed brows are able to convey, and let me know that they'll finish studying her work very soon, and mail me their findings.

I thank them for their time, and leave them with one request: "Don't take those pictures down. Those people are still proud of you. My mother is still proud of you."

I manage to maintain my composure as the people who brought me to the research floor escort me out, and I thank them for their time as I step out of the scientists' building. The sun is warm. The nervous energy of the street breaks on my dampened face, unable to penetrate it.

Chapter 9

As my second day in the capitals wanes, I stumble upon the Shepherds' Collective. As far as towering buildings go, theirs is not particularly inspiring: a sturdy-looking but rudimentary structure of brick and wood and evenly-spaced windows. Curious if anyone would speak with me, I enter and speak to the man at the front desk.

"Good afternoon. I'm looking to speak with someone who works here. Is that possible?"

"Who in particular?"

"Preferably a shepherd, but it doesn't much matter."

"Alright..." he replies, clearly puzzled. "Beth!" A woman behind me, about to step out the door, turns her head.

"This young man wants to speak to someone. Care to take him along for lunch?"

"'Someone'...?"

"'Someone.'"

"...Sure, alright."

We arrive at a local restaurant. The atmosphere is warm, though much of the food they serve I've

never heard of. We order. I find myself blurting out a question.

"Did you have a job before this one?"

"I was a blacksmith."

"Why did you become a shepherd?"

"I couldn't get people to understand the importance of their work. There was some sense of duty it seemed like I couldn't share - I almost felt like they didn't care." I've heard this story before; it's still disheartening.

"I think I've been struggling with that feeling," I reply. "I've inherited a farm, but so many of the farmers I meet don't seem to think it's as important as I do. I could teach someone to take my place in a few years and become a scientist full-time, but it would be disappointing to fully abandon the profession that I was given. It's a part of my mother I don't know if I want to let go."

"You want my advice? The only person you can intentionally change is yourself. Anything else, unless you have impressive luck, is going to be met with disappointment. You can't make them care enough to be satisfied. You're better off finding people like you than making them...And that goes for kids as well, in case you were asking."

As she says it, I am relieved. She has found for me, it seems, my purpose: to prove her wrong. I think about Brian, my friend, my brother. Though we were nudged together by the world, it was us who sewed ourselves together, wrapped the thread around ourselves, tied the knot, and cut the excess so that we our work couldn't be undone. I believe in this power, and I believe that I can use it

to, as Beth put it, *make* friends. Does the citadel of friendship, of all human connection, not have intention seated at its foundation?

After our meal, I thanked her for her time and we part ways. I return to my dormitory in North Waymont. Tomorrow I will return down the long path, backtracking through the towns I have visited, getting a second snapshot of them now that the snowbanks have melted and all the flora—different in every town—has begun to sprout and bloom, before I eventually find my way back through the forest, past the shepherds' commune, past the pond and the mill, past the school, past the town square, and back to the farm.

But tonight, before I drift off to sleep, I open my black notebook. At the top of a blank page I write and underline a simple goal: *"Imparting destiny."*

Part II

Chapter 10

Five years pass

"Don't push yourself too hard—we wouldn't want the trees to win."

I continue walking through the forest checking on students' progress, showing them how to hold various tools and correcting some of their ways of handling moss which might damage it.

I'm in Asteria, just outside of North Waymont, at the largest branch of the Academy of Early Arboreal Education. I started the Academy five years ago, and have been developing it since. These children have been sent by their parents to spend two months here, and while they're here they learn the ways of the farmers, they are also taught a sense of duty and pride in their work.

The mission of the academy is threefold: to inform the general public about the importance of our work; to instill it in our own ranks; and, most importantly, to use it to impress a sense of destiny upon those who may join us some day. Where once tree farmers were left largely to teach the craft

to their children all on their own, now they have an option for us to help guide them as well. Though I spend much of the year speaking with officials and developing our courses, the summer months when we run our program are by far my favorite and most fulfilling.

The creation and proliferation of the Academy has been a group effort with those who share my vision, and for them I'm grateful. Daniel, the former teacher whom I met among the shepherds, is my right hand man. After his many years resigned to the shepherds' commune, feeling that he would never have a chance to return to the world, he joined me without a second thought, and began crossing the country, advertising our mission to big cities and far-flung outposts alike. His dedication could have almost been described as religious fervor, how he sought to share the good news of our mission to as many people as he could find. Thanks to these efforts, we are well-known by many of the tree farmers of Circe. Though he spends much of his time in Asteria, he is often out helping build some new campus in some distant region.

This leaves me here to teach the children and develop our courses. In the latter of these I have grown closer with the shepherds over the years. Though I have never met with any of the leaders at the Shepherds' Collective, many of them much like Daniel have joined our ranks. Though I respect their dedication, they are often hard-pressed to believe in others in a way that seems to come more easily to me. Strange bedfellows, I suppose. We

have also worked closely with the nation of Circe, who has welcomed our imperative with open arms: even those who do not love the profession as I do have expressed their desire for it to be understood and celebrated.

After some time outside, I leave the students with another instructor, and head inside. Lately I've been working on our latest campaign to invite more farmers to our cause. As I sit down to work, my red notebook catches my eye. The notebook my mother gave to me right before she died, with all of the things she taught me. I haven't looked at it in a long time, and begin to idly flip through it. An old letter I received from the scientists falls out of the middle, from the pages where my mother's notes on the subject had been, along with some other slips of paper they had sent with some information they had gathered.

Cardal,

Thank you so much for visiting us. With regards to your mother's research, while it has merit, we have found some issues with the methodology and derivation of results. Included in this letter are proposed changes, along with some of data gathered in our attempt to replicate her work, including highlights of significant differences between our findings and hers, and how we believe they may have come about and how they can be avoided in the future.

> Your mother would be proud of you. You're making sure that her legacy lives on through you, and that her work marches onward, for which all of us and the nation of Circe are grateful.
>
> Best,
> Cleo, Natalia, Oscar, Ted, and Xochitl

The pages these notes were sandwiched between were the first I ever touched with my red pen. Though the notebook is practically soaked in red ink now, I vividly remember reading the scientists' findings for the first time, rereading them, looking for some mistake, hoping that my mother's legacy through her work was still accurate, was still flattering to her. I cried as I took my red pen to her notes to correct them, spilling blood onto those moldering pages, these notes a memorial of her life dying at my hand. Unsure why I took the book out, I return it to my bottom drawer.

Underneath the notebook is a much more recent letter, which I received earlier this week and subsequently forgot about. It's from Darren, the tree farmer from Wellerman. I've written to him once or twice since my first trip to the capital half a decade ago: though we know each others' families, we simply don't speak much.

Cardal,

I hope this letter finds you well. My family and I have been. We visited your hometown recently to get a glimpse of the solar eclipse—everyone there was hospitable, and we left with more friends than we came with. I asked about you, and while you were missed by many, they were all very proud.

I have been receiving your letters about your Academy, but I haven't heard much from you. It sounds like it's taken much of your time—do you still have time for your friends, for your city? If you ever want to come and visit, of course you are always welcome.

I've been hearing some things about your program that are a bit worrying. My children say that some of their friends in other towns who have taken part in your program have stopped writing them, or now speak only of farming and hardly at all of play. I pray they still make time for themselves, to be children.

I know you are busy, so you need not write me back, but if you ever feel so compelled of course I would love to hear from you.

Best,
Darren

I sigh. I have received letters with this sort of accusation before, but they always crush me just the same. Many seem to fear that I intend to rob these children of their happiness. Far more understand that my goal is the opposite: to ensure the happiness of as many people as possible long into the future of humanity. Perhaps I signed up to be a polarizing figure, but out of an excess of love, not a dearth of it. I grab a pen.

Darren,

Thank you so much for your letter. Someday I will make it out again to visit. I am glad to hear you and your family are well.

Childhood is a busy time. Children are learning what is the world around them, learning the idea of the self, the idea of the other. It's a lot to grasp. One of the first most important principles of what we're doing is to make sure that people, especially children, are happy, and setting themselves up to lead happy lives. Of course, there are simply too many things for any child to do in their formative years, let alone in their lifetime. And one of our priorities, in addition to and not in conflict with happiness, is a sense of purpose, a sense of love, and in some ways a confrontation with reality that is often learned too late to be truly absorbed into the soul. And while we try to remind parents that we want all of our youngsters

to go out and make friends and play outside and have fun, there's only so many hours in the day, and at some point you have to set the ball down as well.

I hope that this understanding doesn't come off as clinical. These aren't the kinds of questions everyone needs the answer to: they can warp your perception, and the brightness of the world often seems to dim the more you focus on them. But I still think they're important guidelines to shape the path of ourselves and of the future.

I may take you up on that visit some day soon.

The very best,
Cardal Schafer

A number of months later, I do visit him. His home is similar to how I remember it. I see he's got some of the newest tools on his shelf. Toys much less garish—his children are teenagers now. I thank him for his letter, and he thanks me for mine. We speak of mutual friends, of the changes of the seasons, of our profession; we say nothing of the concerns he spoke of in his letter. I stay only for one night, before continuing on to another destination.

Even in this small friendship, which ought to be as easy to maintain as a desert houseplant, signs of rot and neglect have begun to show around the base, and will slowly work their way up until one day, suddenly, we will not speak anymore.

I think of Brian. What we have is not a desert houseplant, but a lush, towering norocos tree, bearing its lichenous fruit to be harvested, treasured, shared. But as we have continued to write each other letters, he has expressed concerns of his own, and we have not resolved them—the flecks of black and streaks of exposed wood are beginning to rear their ugly heads, and every so often, you will hear the tree *crack* as it eases itself into a slightly weaker position, preparing itself to one day succumb to the forces of wind, or rain, or gravity.

Chapter 11

Ten years pass

The Academy is now a fixture of arboreal education throughout the nation. I am overjoyed at the outpouring of support I have received over the last few years from families, older farmers, and especially Academy graduates: they are grateful that they have skills that they would otherwise never have learned; that within them has been instilled purpose, meaning, and, consequently, joy, which they can pass on to those around them.

We have also garnered a larger collection of detractors, parroting the same tired accusations as before: that I'm being too harsh, that I'm promoting a generation of nervousness and worry. Though my team and I are self-assured in our mission, I am still rattled by more worrying letters, with hodgepodges of insults and threats. The opening of our program outside of Farmer's Berry was met with open hostility from a few folks in the community, who formed a small peaceful protest outside the event. I did speak with them - although we had a

civil conversation, not much was resolved. Many lamented that I'd changed.

One of the people I spoke with that day, my most vocal opponent over the past decade, was Brian. He has begun a political campaign against the Academy, with the stated goal of shutting it down. We have remained...cordial. I truly believe that we both still have love for each other, and despite our great disagreement, we still have shown each other respect. But the pain that we have caused each other is great as well.

His numbers are growing. I stay abreast of what his organization tells people about us, and as time has progressed their desperation has grown. I hear his voice in every letter they send, and in every letter I hear him distancing himself further from the man from whom I once found great insight. I wonder if he thinks the same of me.

I hear a small *thump* at the door of the office from which I write lately. My mail. I step outside and look down. Next to a letter is a newspaper. I see the bottom half of my face, spanning the width of the page. I take the letter and leave the newspaper on the step.

The letter is from the city of Asteria. Upon a tasteful letterhead is written the following:

> Mr. Schafer,
>
> You may have heard of reports regarding your organization in the past months, regarding its practices both out of town and on your grounds, which has been provided

by a municipal land grant. Some of this information has made its way to us, through public channels and private, and it has come to our attention that some of the conduct of your organization is not in line with the values of the city of Asteria.

A motion is being made to reclaim our land grant which is to be voted on at opening on the first Friday of the coming month. You are welcome to attend and state your case.

Regards,
Divya Goswami
Mayor of Asteria

I've grown not to be surprised: those unready or unwilling to see the improvements I want to make in the world take shape see me as a direct threat to their own way of life. I suppose I would have to argue that the sentiment is mutual. All I could do to keep this grant would be to jot down some impressive words for the public to hear in hopes that the council would be swayed, though of course it would not. Perhaps it's for the best. I've already purchased additional land outside of the city, and begun developing new buildings for us to use in case this happened.

I look out at the rest of the office, see our team of year-round employees here in Asteria, no more than fifty, dutifully working. I've worked with most for over a decade now. I'm confident, and grateful, that all would be willing to leave this beau-

tiful building to continue our journey a bit down the road, across town, across the country, to the ends of the earth. But I don't want to have to do that to them.

I consider speaking to them now. I decide it's best to let them continue with their work, and enjoy this space, and the ignorance, as long as they can. And the week is very calm. All are in high spirits. That Friday, I come to work, as I would any other day.

When the weekend comes, I hear nothing from the city of their decision. I figure that on Monday someone will come to our door and let us know how long we have to pack our things. But when I arrive at work on Monday, there is no official letter. On my step is only another newspaper. "Academy stays: unprecedented turnout from shepherd commune at City Hall." As I begin to read it in the doorway, a woman approaches. She says she's with the Shepherds' Collective, and says to come with her back to their headquarters if I have the time. I have no more imminent eviction to fear, the trip is only a couple of hours, and it seems only right to pay my respects, so I come with her.

When we arrive, I'm greeted by the same woman who sat at the front desk during my first visit almost two decades ago. The woman who came with me tells me to take the stairway to the top, remaining on the ground floor herself.

As I ascend, my mind races. What could have brought them to help us? The shepherds famously keep to themselves, and surely making such a pub-

lic endorsement of a company which has a mixed reputation of late wouldn't have much personal benefit to them.

At the top of the stairway is a broad-shouldered man guarding the door, who opens the door and steps aside, gesturing for me to enter. The walls in the room are paneled with wood, each panel with a unique, intricate design. The room is mostly empty, save for a large desk with cushioned chairs on either side of it. The man behind the desk reaches his arms out, eyes a bit cloudy.

"It's good to see you again."

After a moment of confusion, I recognize him.

This is my father.

"You probably have a lot of questions," he resigns. "I suppose I should explain."

* The Legend of Anthony *

Anthony Schafer was born in Farmer's Berry and raised to be a shepherd. In those days, a shepherd was no different than a purveyor of any other good: they often situated their fields at the edge of town so as to give sheep wider, quieter spaces to roam, but they could frequently be found in the town squares, with childhood friends, with families.

Anthony was like any of them. He grew up bright-eyed, eager to take up the mantle of flourishing in his trade. He became a shepherd and married Elizabeth, a tree farmer: the trade had been started in the city by her father. Both brimmed with potential, with ambition, with love. They worked hard but always made time for those important to them; they were adored by all.

However, not long into their marriage their hardship began. While Elizabeth was pregnant with her first child, her father, her only living parent, passed away without warning. The child would never know him, and Elizabeth would have to raise her child without his presence. Anthony had put his work as a shepherd on hold during

the pregnancy, and intended to continue to do so throughout the beginning of the child's life. Now that the town's great expert was gone, this task became much harder.

Of course, Elizabeth was somewhat knowledgeable as well, having been a tree farmer for a few years, but they both felt like they needed more people to talk to. So Anthony began to reach out. He would travel to nearby towns, looking for tree farmers - in those days, there was no network of tree farmers, nobody to ask where to find them. He would ask them for help, never sure quite what help he was asking for, knowing only that he needed it. And many came to his aid: he was offered tools, advice, warnings, encouragement. But he needed more. He needed someone by his side, an expert, to oversee and guide him. And he never found it.

As he continued to search, while he was miles from home, his son was born. But even upon returning home, seeing what he had done, he shortly thereafter packed up again to return to the road.

The town turned on Anthony, a man obsessed and out of touch with what was truly valuable in life. But Elizabeth stuck by him—she even seemed to understand. She would tell people that he was doing something important, something bigger than the both of them. But as the months passed, she became lonely, with none to keep her company but her son and the shell of the man she married. Though their values were so similar, the differences were enough to rip a hole through their marriage, through their son, even through the

town as they began to turn a cold shoulder to him. Some even worried for the future of their son, baby Cardal, that he would grow up to be like his father. Even when Anthony tried to extend what kindness he could muster to those who he knew despised him, he found himself at the wrong end of every conversation, turned confrontation, turned scuffle.

When Cardal was two, they decided that enough was enough. Elizabeth could now return to work, and though her relationship with Anthony had become strained, they had still spoken often of tree farming, and she felt she was ready to return to the profession more well-equipped than she had been before. They decided that what was best for Cardal was for Anthony to leave. Cardal would not learn from the man who sabotaged his own and his family's happiness, so that Cardal would not have to repeat the same cycle.

One day in the early morning, they stood on their front step, Elizabeth holding her son's hand, and Anthony holding a trunk with a few things. Most important among it was a drawing of him with his son which she had drawn.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

"I'm going to the capitals. There are some shepherds there."

"You're going to be a shepherd again."

"I can't continue tree farming. They don't want me."

She fixed her eyes on a patch of grass a few feet away. The sun would be rising soon, and the early light gently warmed the daffodils. They both knew

the day would come, but could not do more than survive it. They shared a polite hug.

Upon reaching the capitals, Anthony attempted to find what he wished he had as a tree farmer. He gathered the shepherds he knew, and they went past the edge of town. For years they keep to themselves, perfect their work, and leave sparingly, usually to buy or sell. He continued on with a hole in his heart, choosing not to fill it but to build scaffolds around it in hopes that his heart would not collapse.

Word spread about this group of hermits near the capitals and their excellent meats and wools. First, other shepherds would come, asking to learn their secrets. He would show them around their commune and explain how it allowed them to focus on this work that was important to them. Some were interested, and other shepherds' communes began to grow nearby, but most were not. Then, people in other professions would come, hearing of their business success and seeking advice. To them he would give the same answer. But many would attempt to build a commune in their own profession and be met with confusion or hostility. Some of them, in frustration, would become shepherds instead, having seen the fulfillment that many of them seemed to share. And the profession evolved in this way, collecting these ambitious souls and slowly purging the rest.

After a number of years, Anthony saw the need for governance, to help orient the work and missions of these communes. With the money he had amassed from his success, he bought a tall building

in South Waymont, founding the Shepherds' Collective. He ceased to be a guide and became something more of a businessman, but felt his place in life was largely the same: that the world was full of passion and his role was to find it and animate it.

For many years, he heard nothing of his son. But when he received news of a young man from Farmer's Berry who had begun to teach younger generations, he took notice. And from afar, when Cardal Schafer needed help, the least he could do was provide.

Chapter 12

"I've heard your name many times these last few years," my father says. "You deserved a father who was there for you, and I truly can take no responsibility for who you've become. But I would be remiss if I didn't feel some sense of unearned pride. Pride that, some way or another, you've turned out a little something like me."

This line rouses me from my astonished stupor and pulls my gaze to his eyes from the speck of dust on the floor I had affixed it to. The heaviness and bafflement inside me turns to strength, and my muscles course with blood, vying to take action. I remain seated.

"You have...no right..."

"I know you might not be happy with everything I did. That's your mother in you, and that's alright. But I hope that we can—"

Thwack! I feel the force of his body against my outstretched arms as our shared momentum hits the ground. My hands feel wet, his face disfigures one punch at a time, *bam, bam, bam,* not quickly enough. I can feel it in my legs against his

torso, he's weak from so many years in his tower, whose evils I can see so clearly now. My shoulder dislocates, the speed with which I'm pulled back from him by the guards who've been called into the room. I struggle, but they far outmatch me. Each holds one of my upper arms and carries me down the stairs silently, save for my occasional grunts in increasingly disheartened attempts to escape. I'm pushed to the sidewalk.

"Don't worry. None of this will be in the papers," the woman at the front desk reassures me from just inside the threshold, behind the guards. She returns to her desk, the guards stay in place, fixated on me. Their eyes dig into my back as I hobble away.

My long walk home leaves me time to stew over our short exchange. My entire adult life has centered around teaching people to balance duty and rest, living with the world and living with others. How could he follow his own son for so long and not understand that? He wanted to see himself in me, and cut away everything essential about me to do it. That selfish bastard.

When I arrive home, there's a man in my front yard. I see him from a distance, but can't quite make him out.

"Hello there. What is your business?"

"Just to speak with my brother."

Though Brian is still too far for me to see him clearly, the moment he speaks I know him. We

embrace - the part of my heart I leave with him for safe keeping returns again, and it shares with me its wholeness, radiating through my chest, flooding my head, and crashing through the rest of my being like a gentle wave.

We haven't seen each other since shortly after my first journey to the capitals fifteen years ago, but we have written each other enough to still watch each other develop as we have gone through life.

Mediocre host that I am, especially after the day that I've had, I invite him in and offer him a place to sleep, but implore him to hold his business until I've had some rest. He generously obliges. In the morning, we have the conversation he came here for. It is tense and bombastic, but honest. Afterwards, he promptly departs. Though we are still friends, it is clear that we have fully gone our separate ways.

The next day I receive a summons.

* The Legend of Brian *

Brian was born in Farmer's Berry, a small town on the west side of the nation of Circe, into a family of architects. He had a close friend, Cardal, with whom he shared his life. Cardal was to be a tree farmer, but the two of them found fulfillment in serving the world through their work, and though Cardal moved away while Brian stayed in town, they never separated in spirit. They would send letters of their adventures and achievements. Brian, always the innovator, would send Cardal hand drawings of schematics, outlines of plans, or occasionally small prototypes of new materials, which Cardal would proudly display on his shelf.

Cardal had started a schooling program for tree farmers: the Academy of Early Arboreal Education. Every year, students would travel to one of their program centers to spend a number of months with other children learning the newest science and technology in the trade. Cardal and his team worked with farmers, scientists and local governments to build a program best suited to make the students' future careers impactful. Instead of

schematics, Cardal would send lesson plans, and contracts allowing his organization to build housing for students near tree farms, which came from cities and towns across Circe.

Cardal never passed up the chance to work with a fresh face or to bring his mission to a new town. His work became his sole object of attention. He had friends in his new home, and they would speak of their lives, but it seemed they were interchangeable to him: Brian would seldom receive a letter speaking of the same friend twice. Never again did Cardal make a promise like the one he had made Brian as a child, a promise to always share his life.

In contrast, though Brian loved working with architects by mail, he took pride in rarely leaving town, having long conversations with shopkeepers, and hosting parties for his friends and neighbors. Everyone who lived within an hour's walk of his home knew him by name. These pursuits would often hinder his career: though he had his share of accomplishments—he had many buildings to his name, and his designs and techniques could be seen in the works of others for miles around—he would occasionally miss an opportunity to work with some young hotshot with a big idea, or he would have to take on smaller projects to help out a friend preparing for a wedding, a funeral, or just a visit from a friend who had moved away.

As the years passed, Cardal's view of the world changed. While the newspapers portrayed him as a level-headed, selfless man, his letters to Brian began to brim with pessimism and bile. He seemed to want the people in his life to be machines—

machines which were perfectly compatible with the one he had spent so many years turning himself into. His decrials of his compatriots took the tone of an machinist cursing a leaky oil drum. Though others could not see it as clearly, Brian saw his friend's company become slowly infused with that desire to shape the world into a functioning machine, casting aside any excess, any material which could not be integrated into that design.

Brian never held his tongue. He wrote in his letters that he believed Cardal had begun to see his frustration, and his retreat into his work, as virtues to be spread, but that they were in fact poisonous. Brian began to speak more of his personal life in his letters, in hopes that Cardal would see the magic in them that Brian felt with the people of Farmer's Berry.

But nothing seemed to work. Brian and Cardal watched the rift between them slowly grow. They spent years on two large sheets of ice, each tugging on a rope. No matter how hard they pulled, the forces of nature were simply too great to overcome, and soon they had to shout to even speak with each other.

Their letters took on strange tones.

Dear Cardal,

> I have spent much of my day considering how to stop your work from poisoning even more cities. You have dealt great damage to Circe. I miss the days when we had the same vision for the world, and I often

cry reminiscing. My friends are well, and we are all preparing for the harvest festival. I am grateful to hear that you were able to spend a few days in the northern capital—I enjoyed when we visited together, many years ago.

Your friend,
Brian

Dear Brian,

I miss those days as well. I miss when our friendship was simple, and we did not see each other as hopelessly astray. Nevertheless, I will continue my work, and pray that the world continues to find the value in it that you do not. I look forward to hearing stories from the harvest festival. I hope to someday return to Farmer's Berry to participate in it myself - even if only to share it with you and your family.

Your friend,
Cardal

Brian found more time to think about the consequences of his friend's path. He set his tools down on his drafting tables for a month to pay him a visit.

Brian saw all of the hints of himself in his childhood friend. The gestures in his hands, the way he always kept a watchful eye as they walked through

a neighborhood, the way they used to when they were skipping school. "This path reminds me of the ones we walked in our last winter together," Cardal said as they took a stroll around. They noticed that they had adopted the same stances as they had years ago - the hands in the pockets, the gaze fixed on the same spot in the distance, the same pacing of glances at each other as they spoke.

But of course, he had come to have a very specific conversation. He silently took a deep breath.

"Cardal, you can't keep running the Academy the way you are." He lowers his glance even further into the dirt. He feels his friend look at him for a split-second before assuming the same position.

"Why not?"

"I know you think you're doing what's best for these children. But there's a cost to it. They're coming back not themselves."

Cardal's voice gets a bit louder, as this is an argument he has had many times, with many people, for many years: "Teaching is nothing if not transformative. Telling me that my students are changing is an empty accusation. And this isn't just best for them. It's best for their friends, their family, their communities."

"That's the word—they're coming back empty. Hopeless. I know it's not your goal, but you can't deny that it happens far too often." The cavity in Brian's chest which once held their shared goals for the future throbs. They come to a bench, overlooking the river they've been walking along. Though neither is particularly tired, they're both relieved to sit down.

"Nobody can expect perfect success with everyone, especially when kids are involved," Cardal continued. "They're unpredictable. I do all that I can. I always stress that happiness ought to come first. Every student that's ever come through my program knows that."

"You're telling them to be happy, but giving them every reason not to be," Brian replied. "You can't act surprised when all of your hatred finds its way into their heart."

"I only tell them the truth: that if they don't work hard enough, the world might succumb to the bitter cold on a bad winter. I know it's tough, but it's important; if they don't know that, then there's no reason for them to try as hard as they should. Do you not fear death? If not yours, that of our progeny, at least? The end of the world?"

"You have already decided how you believe the world will end," Brian retorted. "These kids live their whole lives with the sword of Damocles hanging over them."

"Have I hung it there?"

"Haven't you?"

"Absolutely not. I'm only making sure they remember it's there. Would you rather they go about life misinformed?"

"You don't understand the gravity of what you're doing, Cardal. It's not right. If you keep this up, I'll have to try to stop you. You always say that the most important things in life, that you're trying to preserve, are other people: your friends, your family, your community. But are they truly

more important to you than the *feeling* of helping them that you get from your work?"

Brian, of course, already knew the answer. "Understood," he says in response to Cardal's silence. They sat for a moment, watching the river go by. A few small sticks float by. Some get caught on the river bank. They wave with one end on the shore and the other in the water, as if they were calling out to the other sticks to come and pull them loose.

Over the next year, Brian spent much of his time speaking to those who had been involved in the Academy, some as students, but many as collaborators or employees. Brian staunchly insisted upon referring to all of them as "victims." His letters with Cardal didn't stop during this time; in fact they became more positive. Perhaps they had both come to grieve the part of their relationship that had died, and they were able to focus again on what remained. They often joked about the absurdity of their friendship. But the stories he heard still shook him. He formed a small organization for the purpose of his campaign against the Academy.

Brian finally arrives at the courthouse with a legal complaint against the Academy.

"What is the nature of this complaint, sir?" the woman at the entrance to the department asks.

"Criminal," he replies. They are no longer civil, no longer friends, in this matter. Not in this

place. Cardal is a criminal and Brian seeks to bring him the justice he deserves. He hands over the paper.

He leaves the courthouse self-assured. He has grieved the part of his friend that he has lost, and in its place has sprouted determination. He enjoys the afternoon sun on his walk home to spend the rest of the day with his family.

Chapter 13

Criminal Complaint 0013582

Plaintiff: Brian Bishop, Class Action Complaint and the Nation of Circe

Defendant: Cardal Schafer and the Academy of Early Arboreal Education ("the Academy")

Complaint: The prosecution alleges that the defendants, throughout the course of their youth programs, have engaged in psychological abuse of minors and forced unpaid child labor, including:

1. Teaching children (ranging from ages 3 to 17) to "look within for happiness" as it is "the greatest indicator of neglect of responsibility," that "all relationships can be replaced but tree work cannot," and to "not associate with those who attempt to make you work less," among other claims,

2. Sending children to work on tree farms "until they feel no satisfaction," being forced to work for weeks at a time with pauses only to eat and sleep,

3. Withholding information regarding the activities of the programs from parents and instructing children not to divulge such information with those not currently or previously affiliated with their programming.

The defense alleges that this has taken place since 15 years prior to the publication of this complaint and continues to take place at the time of writing. The members of those registered under the Class Action portion of this complaint (the "Class") consist of former pupils and family members of pupils of the Academy's youth programs, and are seek mental health damages, which the prosecution seeks to distribute by diagnosis. Among these diagnoses, having been confirmed by independent professionals to not only be present in the plaintiffs but also to be a direct result of the actions of the defendants, include but are not limited to:

1. Intermittent explosive disorder, characterized by sudden outbursts of rage and diminished impulse control, to the point of impeding function,

2. Major depressive disorder,

3. Bipolar disorder,

4. Paranoid personality disorder.

The plaintiffs are also seeking conviction of Schafer for dangerous act manslaughter, as his actions and organization of this program have prov-

ably led, as has been again confirmed by independent professionals, to the suicides of a number of former members of these programs, and for pecuniary damages for the families of the victims.

The defendants can be seen to have been acting with the knowledge of these implications, as they had been regularly updated by the defense on the acts, methodologies and findings of these independent studies, which have been continuously running since the formal inception of the Class ten years prior to writing. Beyond this personal contact, these stories have been continuously publicized since their inception as well, this distribution being the Class's primary focus.

It is with this information in mind that the plaintiffs request that the court order:

1. The Academy to be formally dissolved,

2. The assets of the Academy to be liquidated and the resulting funds to be paid directly to the victims of the psychological abuse inflicted by Academy and their families, apportioned pursuant to the first appendix of this complaint,

2. The conviction of Cardal Schafer on 175 counts of dangerous act manslaughter of the victims listed in the second appendix of this complaint.

Respectfully submitted,
Brian Grant, in service of himself and the Class,
Ava Marino, in service of the Nation of Circe.

Chapter 14

The court date is set for tomorrow, Monday morning. I sit in my office, looking out the window, sure of my fate, wondering how I could have done better. I open my mother's blue notebook. *Don't open that book until you need to,* she had said. I always intended to save it for a moment that I felt lost, but in the decades I've held onto it, I've never had a moment where I was truly concerned of whether I was walking the path she had laid out for me. But even so, given that tomorrow may be the most important day of my life, there is probably no better time to read it than the present. The spine *cracks* as I open it. There is a note on the first page.

> Cardal,
>
> I'm so glad you found the right time to read this. I admit that as I write I'm a bit worried that it'll never hit your eyes, that it'll never feel like the right time, that you'll find everything moving around you so fast that you don't have the time of day for me. Slowing down is a skill I won't be around

to see you learn, though it's one I see budding inside you. There are many things like that to come in your life. I guess you could call them milestones. One of the things that makes me the saddest nowadays is that I won't get to see you achieve them. Please take the time to congratulate yourself for them for me when you remember to.

I know you're a patient boy. If you're reading this, you're almost surely truly lost. Maybe you've grown old enough to reckon with some of the harder questions in life. I know that now you're so focused on making me proud, and every day it makes me smile; I'm always telling everyone in town that you're going to grow up and do great things. But as proud as I may be from afar, forever and always, soon you will only be able to hear me from echoes within yourself.

I see so much of your father in you. I see his hunger to do good that will be felt for generations, the pride he took in the willingness to do what was right when nobody else had the confidence or the drive to. It's one of the things I loved about him, and that I now get to love about you. But this pride can turn into desire. It can try to trick you when you find a place for yourself, a sword that only you know how to wield. It will do its best to convince you that swinging it around will bring only good to the world, and will be the greatest tool for do-

ing so you'll ever have. When you find new machines, new ideas, this sword will whisper in your ear to look away, to stay focused, lest you be tempted by them and swayed from your righteous path. And it may be right. But if not, this desire can become one of your greatest enemies. I pray you always treat the sense of purpose that has been given to you with the respect and the caution it demands, and let it always be your ally.

You're growing into a wonderful young man. You have so much to offer the world. The only thing I wanted to remind you of is that sometimes you have to take a step back to find out what it's asking of you.

Love you,
Mom

The remaining pages consist of drawings of me, of our old neighbors, of our home, of our forest in the state it was all those years ago.

I was right to open the book sitting down. I wish she could have been there to cheer me on over the last decade. I wish I could hear her say she was proud of me in person, and not just in the ever-fading echoes in my head.

And I'll take her advice. Tomorrow will be a big day, and after that, I'll finally take the time to rest, to be proud of myself and what I've done.

Chapter 15

I arrive in court the following Monday. The trial is expected by most to be swift and decisive. As assured as I am in myself, I understand that justice requires understanding, which is something I may not be granted, not by any fault of the court or its onlookers, but simply because it is a complex issue I don't expect many to be able to truly comprehend.

Brian's opening remarks are concise. He is eloquent, but his remarks are no more than they need to be. I am given my chance to speak. This will likely be the last the world will hear from me.

"I was raised by a loving mother, a tree farmer herself. Though she passed away while I was a teenager, I have dedicated my life to emulating her philosophy. She lived to serve her community, to sow seeds of joy both in those around her and in those beyond her reach. My work with the Academy was borne of her. Its goal is to bring joy to Circe and the world at large. However, its vision is far-reaching, and to understand joy, one

must come to terms with the way of the world, and therein understand sacrifice.

"One of the great traits that sets humanity apart from our animal counterparts is investment beyond perception. All creatures have the inborn drive to preserve their lineage, but most lack the foresight to understand the consequences of this nature with regard to less obvious chains of causation. Where to live, what to eat, how to expend daily life, none of these incite survival instincts; and how can we expect them to? Many of these relationships are far too complex for us to be able to expect our instincts to be able to navigate them. But as humans we have been granted the unique gift to figure out these relationships by hand.

"Of course, one of the obvious struggles arising from this understanding is a latent sense of duty to act in such a way so as to contradict our internal reward system. Working a strenuous job to feed a far-away family, taking medicine that alleviates some unfelt ailment without providing any noticeable change to the body, tasks that don't spark a feeling of 'you're doing this right! Keep on going!' but only give us pen-and-paper confirmation that we're acting as we should.

"This is the sort of task that I find myself particularly suited for. One of my greatest fears is that there are not enough of us willing to perform them to avoid some of the pitfalls that neglecting them may inevitably lay at our feet. I didn't see this drive that I have in my fellow tree farmers; that is how I knew that I had to start this program. We've found

many folks with it to integrate into our ranks, and have worked to instill it in others.

"This sense of duty is not unique to those in our organization. In fact, it has lived within our nation for many years, though kept at arms length from the general populace. The shepherds who live in the outskirts of nearly every city have managed for their own endeavors a wonderful thing: they take those with this sense of duty built into them and put them to work towards their cause. This approach has two problems. The first is one I think that all of you will agree with: they isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Nobody outside of their own ranks gets to see those folks as people, as amalgamations of joy and sorrow and compassion and greed and confusion and clarity and love. This is a great deficit to us that they present. The other issue is more practical: this dries up this valuable resource of righteous purpose for the other sectors of our society that absolutely need it as well. Of course, even if this resource were more evenly distributed, there would almost surely still not be enough to go around to all of the laboratories, all of the universities, all of the industries of the world. This is why a large part of our core mission is to generate this resource, of course for our own project, but also with the hope of inspiring others to do the same.

"Of course, the Academy teaches happiness first. When working to improve the distant future, many things are uncertain, and completely throwing the present generation to the wind on a chance is simply irresponsible. This, to my under-

standing, is why my mother spent so much of her life dedicated not only to tree farming, but to fully embracing her community, which was not only a more tried-and-true way of improving the lives of future generations through sowing seeds of social wellbeing, but a way to invest in the present as well. But when investing in the present and the future are in contrast with each other, you have to make a decision. I have a plan to nurture my skills and my sense of duty into something that can have a lasting positive impact that can be appreciated both by people who can become one with this understanding, and, more importantly, by the world at large. My methods with the Academy are extreme relative to stakes which may be more familiar, but with the scope and timeline of the potential outcome in mind, even if the chances of truly saving the world with this project are next to zero, it is the right choice to make.

"Some folks have had severely negative outcomes upon taking on our program. This is a burden that everyone in our organization lives with daily. Many of these folks were children when they first came to us, and it is certainly in no way their fault that such fates have befallen them. With that said, it is also true that these cases are relatively small in number, and for each of them, many have found both a sense of purpose to their own lives and a way to channel it into an outlet that can bring good to the world.

"I appreciate that all of you are here with the best intentions, that you have followed your heart, and that it has led you against me. I appreciate also

that my short treatise here will not be taken with open arms; it brushes up so much against our most basic instincts as to how we live. But I trust in myself, and in this project, and in the future of Circe. I hope only that the seeds I have planted in this short twenty years in this industry can keep this fire alive to the next generation, and that they can continue to pass this torch as well."

As I move to take my seat, the remaining years of my life all begin at once. I am whisked from one place to the next, practically without my awareness, as my trial continues. I sleep in different holding cells as some amount of time passes. I am sentenced to life in prison, after which my environment begins to be the same. I write letters to supporters on the outside. I keep up to date with new research, attempting when I can to input my own expertise, though the process is often complicated by the public desire to maintain the negative connotation my name has garnered.

At some point, I am told of the discovery of a disease which lies dormant in the moss used to prevent and treat the bitter cold. It appears that it has been present for generations, but has lied dormant until now. However, it appears that it can be activated by high levels of pollen in the air, which are forecasted to come within the next two years. And indeed, once those two years pass, the world's moss supply is at once gone. The bitter cold strikes quickly. Due to its frequent interactions with moss in the past, it has become invariably lethal in its absence. Scientists suggest that the human popula-

tion will last another sixty years at most. I contract the disease after one.

I could lament that my mission was a failure; that the fault laid on my shoulders; that if we had only pushed harder, the end could have been indefinitely postponed. But everything was by the book; in the end we were only stopped by bad luck, so there's no use sitting in regret. All there is left to do is to gaze into the sunset and appreciate the last few beautiful drops of humanity that the world has to offer.

* The Legend of Cardal *

Cardal Schafer was born in a small town.
He visited a big city,
And learned how to build his own.
As the walls went up,
They hid the faces of the people outside,
And no matter what he gave them,
The wall still lied between.